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Bubba Denk and other pranksters and predators

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by

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For my parents.

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DEAL ME A CHEVY

From the stories his father told, Les knew all about Bubba Denk. He knew Bubba was the meanest, smartest, slickest, fastest, most charming car dealer on the sunnier side of the Mason-Dixon line. That Bubba could sell the most expensive car on the lot to the biggest skinflint in town. Les saw that the practicality of his father, Ronny Taylor, prevented Ronny from being as good a salesman. His father always insisted on wearing out a pair of shoes until the soles cracked or the stitching in the leather came loose before he'd purchase new ones. The principle was the same with suits, combs, mops, saws. The broom in the showroom closet was worn almost to the nub, caked gray with dirt, but in spite of Les' protests, his father said it still worked. Patrons expected car salesmen to look as polished as new cars. With his worn-out shoes and threadbare collars, Ronny looked unsuccessful even in a good year, and it scared away customers.

Les Taylor walked to the edge of his father's dealership. The sun was just showing itself over the top of Bubba's new car sales lot across the way. The morning light flowed off the metal roof onto the dazzling cars beneath making them shine like so many baubles on a country club wife's fingers. Behind the showroom window, Les could see Bubba rushing around, waving his arms in a high school band instructor fashion, frantic to get his ensemble ready for the performance.

It wasn't just the fancy talk that got folks to buy from Bubba, although Bubba liked to say his sales pitch alone was worth a new savings bond a line. Les saw balloons tied to the car antennas in Bubba's lot, and he heard about the cash prizes, glittering gifts, free car polish, and country music by families like the Judds played over the loudspeaker. And plenty of Bubba elbow grease. Les often saw Bubba wiping even the smallest speck of dust off a car window to make it glisten as entrancingly as an engagement ring. But Les had seen his father do this, too. He had seen the band of sweat around the collar of his father's neatly buttoned Oxford at the end of a hot summer day, the dampness under the arms. His father did much of the upkeep around the lot himself because extra help for that kind of work cost money, money he had but didn't want to spend. Les knew Ronny always worried that there could be bad times ahead. If his father didn't care so much for the business, Les could laugh out loud at the salesman role Denk played so well. A blue Camaro drove by, picking up dust from the edge of the road before it turned right into Bubba's.

Dang, Les hated working for his father every summer. He used to feel sick to his stomach when he first helped sell cars, worrying he'd mess up a sale, or worse yet, that he'd look like a phony. Like one of those people who come to your door around dinnertime and give you a sales pitch about magazines or a set of encyclopedias. And he wasn't going to meet any girls this way. A whole summer and probably not a

single pair of long legs that he could admire. His friends were lucky enough to be working at the pool.

Through the back window of the Camaro, Les saw Denk's son, Billy, leaning his head against the partly rolled up window and two beautiful hunting dogs inside. One of Bubba's salesmen was driving, since Billy had his license suspended a few months before for speeding a few too many times. The aftergust from the car kicked back at Les, throwing dirt in his eyes. He blinked away the blindness and held his mouth shut tightly until the dust settled. He rested his hands in his back pockets as if to guard his skinny wallet from Denk's anxious sales drive. The sun had now reached several feet above Bubba's, so there was nothing but a silhouette. Les turned back into his father's lot only to find the sun glaring off the Taylor showroom window, hitting his eyes like a blow to the head. He went inside, careful to brush the dust off his alligator boots.

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Bubba loved getting the best of a deal. He loved to outtalk folks, outsmart them, outthink them. Most of all, he loved to move the merchandise. Not every sale had to contain a monster profit. He knew a flow of goods gave off a promise of prosperity which drew the crowds. The cars of shoppers steadily trickled into the parking lot like a gentle spring rain. But the sun was shining, the balloons waved colorfully around the sales lot, and all his salesmen had showed up and

on time. Bubba could tell that this was going to be a good day.

Over in the full-size pickup truck department, he saw trouble about to spill over on a salesman named Mike. He wandered on over, slow and easy, sniffing the breeze like a contented hound.

"Howdy, Mike," Bubba said.

"Hi, Bubba," he said, resting on the hood of a new truck.

"Now, Bubba, you been dealing with me for over'n twenty years," cut in Joe Dingell, a pecan farmer from down the road near where Bubba's old lot used to be. "Right, aren't I?"

"Course you are, Joe," Bubba said. "And we've been mighty good friends, too, haven't we, Joe?"

"My wife and I been coming over to your house for years. And I know your kids since they been little."

Bubba chuckled. It always warmed the heart to hear a real, deep down, semi-honest chuckle. "How I do love your wife's sweet potato pone, Joe. Don't tell Betty this, but I like your wife's sweet potato pone better than hers."

Joe was a friend, indeed, just as Bubba had said, and he really did like Maelee's pone better than his own wife's, so he was telling no fib, but what he wanted now was the surge of joy in his gut when he watched this new truck move out of his lot with Joe at the wheel.

"But Bubba, Mike here is telling me that you'll only give me a $500 trade-in on my old Chevy and it got a good 100,000

miles left on her. But it's getting to the point as I can't figure out what's wrong with her, just the little things that come with age. Anyone with a good hand in engines is going to like her and I'll be real sorry to see her go," Joe said.

Joe looked at Bubba. Joe's shoulders jumped as if he were taking in a breath to speak a piece more, but he dropped them and let out the air through puckered lips.

"A car is like an old girlfriend," said Bubba. "Sorry to see her go, but you're ready for the new one."

"Well, I don't know, Bubba. I've been married a while, but I just want a white stripe, and Mike here says it's going to cost me another $250 seeing as the truck already has a blue stripe on it that I don't want."

"Joe, here's what I'm going to propose." Bubba furrowed his brow. "We're going to give you $550 for your trade-in because, Joe, you're right, that engine and body still have a good 50-60,000."

"100,000," Joe said.

"With a lot more care, yes," said Bubba. "And we'll put on the new stripe at no charge and bill you for $45 which covers the labor. How does that sound, Joe?"

"That's more comfortable to me."

"You'll still have Betty and me over for some pone?"

"Any day," Joe said.

*****

Les saw his father's office was neat as if he had just

unwrapped all his furniture. The rows of filing cabinets along the back wall were the only clue that he had been selling cars on this very lot for thirty years. The awe Les felt was for a man who could get up early five days a week for thirty years to do the same thing day after day. This first year of college, he had often wondered how he'd make it to the end of each week. The manila files before him now were filled with receipts, warranty contracts, and the names of local customers. Each of those receipts was a story of success. And Les wanted no part of it.

Les had to declare his major come fall semester. His father wanted him to concentrate on a business degree. This summer Ronny had told him, "I'm going to test your business sense to the limit. You'll see you're a natural at it." It made Les feel sluggish just to think of a future in his father's car dealership, and that one day it would be handed on to him. That's what the family expected. He opened his eyes wide and stifled a yawn. He wanted to study anything other than what could lead him to sit behind his father's desk filling out forms, smiling pleasantly at customers, convincing folks on a daily basis that he was more trustworthy than the salesman across the street. The only problem was that he had been more sure when he was ten what he wanted to do with his life than he was now. He hoped by senior year some brilliant idea would hit him. Preferably something that left him alone to his task like a park ranger, something so he wouldn't have

to make conversation.

Bubba Denk's dealership had moved only half a year before from near Dingell's plot. The pecan grove was now the only thing stirring east of town. From what he had seen, Les had a feeling that Bubba wasn't as organized as Ronny, but Bubba did a heck of a business. When Les watched Bubba through the showroom window, he thought of his father's morning meetings with the salespeople, meetings which resembled a quiet ballet. He looked at his father from the doorway. After his grades slipped second semester, Les lost his car privileges. No car meant no social life. His father glanced up from a ledger as Les entered the office.

"What are we gonna do about Bubba and his cotton-pickin' two-faced dealership?" Ronny said.

Les stared out the window. He squinted against the sunlight. Why did he have to worry about his father's business during his summer break? If he thought of the future at all, it took place away from Spanish moss and car lots.

"I don't know, Pop," he said. Everyone knew Bubba Denk was unstoppable. Impenetrable as a 'gator's back. And his jaws were closing in tight on the Taylor business. Alligator jaws can't be pried open by the average man.

Les looked more closely at his father's office and the showroom behind him. His father's manners, the recent worry from unbalanced ledgers engraved in thin lines under his eyes. Les' gaze shifted to the walls. The paint wasn't quite white

enough, the carpeting not quite new. But the cars were as carefully polished as his mother's silver.

Les thought of a crooked politician they had read about in history class. George Washington Plunkitt. The most likable crook most people had ever met, George Washington Plunkitt used to say, "I seen my opportunities, and I took'em." And took'em Bubba did. When Maddox Kline retired and put his laundromat lot on sale across from the Taylors, he offered it first to Ronny, but Ronny thanked him and then refused. How much of a dealership could one man want? Les heard him say to Mrs. Taylor. But Les saw that Bubba took his opportunities, and listening to people at the barber's, Les learned that Bubba had been beating his dad at a lot of things for as long as people could remember.

*****

Under orders from his father, Les examined the way Bubba handled every kind of situation. His dad would send him over to Bubba's lot just to watch. He'd listen to Bubba's talk, catch the wave of his arm, the confidential wink he'd give the unsure customer. At first, Les couldn't fathom why Bubba wouldn't scoot him off his lot, until he realized Bubba was a showman. Any audience he could get, he'd take - even his competitor's son.

This was a bright Saturday morning in June, a month when Ronny and Bubba always hoped to sell a few more cars with parents going soft at their children's graduations, weddings,

first jobs. It wasn't yet nine o'clock, and Bubba had already sold two cars. Les knew the story of rivalry for a high school sweetheart. Bubba won. Both Bubba and Ronny went on to college. Bubba got the football scholarship, not that Ronny tried for it. He was too small. Both came back home after graduation and took positions in competing car dealerships. Four years later, they set up their own lots. But then, while Bubba's son had ended up in juvenile court for shoplifting, Les had received an academic scholarship for his freshman year of college, even though he got a little cocky and let his grades slide. While no one knew for sure if Bubba and Ronny were still trying to outdo one another, they guessed that they were. Bubba had moved in across the street, after all.

Music skipped over the road from Bubba's busy square. Most of Ronny's customers were browsers hoping to avoid the crowds at Bubba's until they decided what they wanted. Maybe people felt the car smelled fresher, had a beat of its own if it came from a flashier showroom like Bubba's. *But a new car is a new car,* Les thought. *What's the difference?*

"I could grab us a couple of burgers."

Ronny said, "I mean, I want to beat that skunk."

"I don't think he's so bad," Les said. "I hear he gives folks a pretty straightforward deal."

Ronny's neck reddened.

"How can you say that when he won't sell you those two

hunting dogs of his."

"Well, they're his dogs, Pop. He doesn't have to sell them if he doesn't want to," Les said.

A customer rolled slowly out of the Taylor lot, probably to cross the road to Bubba's. Les glanced guardedly out the office window. He wished the car weren't so long in pulling into traffic. The tips of his boots stared back up at him around the edges of his jeans. Les could never help grinning when he saw them, their upside down smile peeking up at him. He had got that 'gator, even if he wasn't much at getting customers to buy. Just aim for the soft underbelly.

"Why don't you go on over for the day. See what Bubba's up to," said Ronny.

Les hated feeling like a spy, especially if this is what it meant to be an adult. Just like calling people on the phone made him nervous. Getting information about school, dentist appointments, movie times. He was always grateful to get the recording at the movie theater.

"Bubba's going to know what I'm up to."

"You're right, he will," said Ronny. "He'll think you're after those dogs again. Shoot, son, look at the mob over there. I mean, Denk may be in such a good mood today, you might get those dogs, yet."

*****

Les took another bite of hot dog. His face creased into a frown. By concentrating on the food, he felt less

conspicuous, as if he could hide behind the two lines forming between his eyebrows. His mother told him those lines were getting to be a permanent feature, and she'd place her hand firmly on his forehead as if she could smooth them away. "You don't have to worry so much like your father," she'd say. Mustard coated his upper lip and relish fell from the corner of his mouth to the ground.

"Les, my boy," said Bubba, coming up behind him.

Les whirled around. He shoved the chunk of hot dog to the side of his cheek.

"Yes, sir," he said. He felt awkward enough being on Bubba Denk's lot without getting caught eating his free food. It was as if he had worn the wrong clothes to a dance.

"Doesn't your father feed you or can we talk you into a car today?" Bubba said.

"No, sir," he said, swallowing his mouthful. "I don't think my father would like that too much."

"No, I don't suppose he would." Bubba pointed to his own upper lip. "You planning on joining the circus?"

"What? No, sir," Les said. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "You have a lot of people here today."

"Yes, we do a booming business." That warm chuckle slipped out of Bubba's throat again. But it only reminded Les of the dogs he couldn't get from him, of the dark raccoon rings around his father's eyes, of his mother's large pile of coupons in the kitchen. He got embarrassed when he went to

the food store with his mother and she handed the coupons to the cashier. It was as if she were crying out that the Taylors would never be as good as the Denks. He admired Bubba for his savage energy.

Bubba steered him toward the used car lot. They stopped beside a blue Chevy Camaro.

"Good racing car, Les."

"Yes, sir. Someone won in one of these last week over at the Speedway." He dropped his voice, his slight smile plunging back into a frown. *Remember*, he thought, *Bubba won't sell you those dogs*.

"Why don't you get in her? See how it feels behind the wheel."

"Well, I don't know, Mr. Denk. You know I'd never buy a car off of your lot."

"I'm not asking you to buy it, son. Just sit in it."

Bubba opened the door for him. There was a nip of impatience behind his fawning that surprised Les. Les wavered. Shoot, he wasn't going to buy it. The inside was clean, except for a couple of dog hairs on the back of the driver's seat, the dashboard polished with Armor-All, the windows sparkled. He squinted his eyes against the glare of the sun, the small breeze, the light flashing from the roof of the car. He didn't spot anyone he knew. He got in.

"So? What do you think?" Bubba asked.

"Pretty nice," Les said. He adjusted the rearview

mirror. "Mr. Denk, you wouldn't be thinking of selling those dogs, would you?"

"No, but I can tell you're keen on them."

"They're great hunting dogs. And there's a real important hunt coming up this fall right before I head back to school. They're offering enough prize money that I could buy," and here Les broke off.

"Buy what, son?"

"Buy a car, sir. From my dad. Those dogs are fine." He put his hands on the steering wheel and stared ahead. He knew his dad wouldn't let him have a car again, but he had said it.

"Your Pa makes you buy a car from him? He won't just give it to you?"

"That wouldn't be fair of me, Mr. Denk."

Bubba smiled the wide smile of a snake, and Les had to keep himself from shuddering. Les thought his father won the trustworthy salesman test hands down.

"Well, son, that's mighty thoughtful of you. Thinking of your father that way," Bubba said. "Most kids, now most kids wouldn't hesitate. They wouldn't think to save their parents the money. He'd give you a car wholesale, I hope?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"I see. But if you really want to help your Pa out, son, you need to get a car wholesale somewhere else."

Les thought of getting out of the car, but Bubba was leaning over the doorway.

"You see," said Bubba, "if you get a car wholesale from your dad, well, then he can't sell that car for a profit to someone else. I wish I could help you out, with a beauty like this," and Bubba patted the roof, "but even though this is used, I trust I'll make a few pennies from it."

Les looked over Bubba's shoulder at a couple standing unattended near a Buick. The woman held a thin wool sweater about her shoulders in spite of the heat, while the man had a slick, nylon parka zipped to the neck of his graying head. Bubba turned his head.

"Son, sit behind the wheel as long as you like. I've got to talk some business."

"Yes, sir," Les said. He twitched uncomfortably. Sun poured through the windshield. Without Bubba standing over the door, Les felt even more conspicuous. He saw Billy standing in the shade of the showroom roof, doing nothing in particular. Les looked around cautiously, got out, and shut the door. He hadn't realized how hot it was in there with the sun coming through the windows - like a sauna where all the rich businessmen in town make their deals. The sweat on his forehead felt cool.

He saw Bubba approach the couple with his arms outstretched like a man about to pull in a very large fish.

"Hi there. You folks been helped?" Bubba said. Les thought Bubba had a huge voice, as if he were consciously advertising his friendly style.

"Well, just looking really," said the gentleman. "Just wondering, what's the bottom line?"

"Oh, you're looking at 26," Bubba said.

"We don't need anything that fancy," said the lady.

"Well, Mrs....?" Bubba began.

"Hyde."

"Mrs. Hyde, Mr. Hyde," Bubba gave a quick nod, "this is not a car I would encourage every customer to buy. But I took one look at you and I could tell you were people with class. I could see you two traveling contentedly once you retire in this fine piece. A couple has to get a car that matches their situation in life. And this car is elegant." He ran his hand through the air as if he were astonished that he could touch the same breath that caressed the car.

Les saw the way Bubba made the folks feel special. Ronny could talk business, but he didn't perform the way Bubba did. What Les couldn't understand was that Bubba's mannerisms were so obviously exaggerated, yet the customers still believed him. *I guess flattery works that way*, said Les to himself. *Flattery.*

Les walked over to Bubba as he left the Hydes with a less intimidating salesman.

"You sure know how to move the cars, Mr. Denk."

"It's been a modest day, four or five sales," Bubba said. He blinked several times into the sun, then asked, "If you had a car, would your father let you bring it to school?"

"Sure. I had one last year, but my sister needs it for work this fall." He didn't want to mention his grades.

"I see," said Bubba. "That's too bad. You'll be a sophomore? How you going to take a girl out on a date?"

Les shuffled his feet in the dirt. His boots winked at him in the early afternoon light. Now how had he caught that 'gator? His father carried the gun and Les held the spear. The gun was just in case things got out of control, a leg slipping too close to the edge of the water. Or a dog sticking his nose in the tall wet grasses one too many times. Not that a fellow needed a dog to hunt alligators, but the company was nice. Only thing is, a good sized 'gator is drawn to a dog like a car salesman to a willing customer. Les looked at Bubba, saw his large teeth flashing. He looked for Bubba's weak underbelly.

"I feel sorry for any college fellow not able to ask a girl out because he doesn't have a car," Bubba said. "I'd love to cut you a deal. I got the Camaro for a steal." He leaned confidentially toward Les. "Would you believe I got this for $450? This car," Bubba swept his eyes over it, "this car was meant for you. I wish I could sell it to you, son, but I wouldn't be one to undermine your father. He's too good a man, and he's raised too fine a son."

Les heard Mike running toward him and Bubba.

"The Hydes. They have a pretty funny request."

Bubba moved a little ways from Les, but Les tried to

listen in, especially since he wasn't getting those dogs. He slid toward the rear of a nearby car as if he were studying its line and condition.

"They said they'll accept your offer, if, and this is the funny part, if you can get a hold of Joe's wife's sweet potato pone recipe," Mike said.

"Now how am I supposed to do that?" Bubba said. "I doubt she'd tell her own mother. That thing has won prize after prize. Tell them no."

"They're going to Ronny's if you don't come up with the ingredients by five today."

"Sweet pansies. This gives me another idea," Bubba said. Les tried to get away as Bubba angled toward him. "Where is that goody-two-shoes' son? There he is. Son. You come along with me a minute."

"I don't want a pone recipe," Les said. Blood rushed to his cheeks.

"Just come along, son," Bubba said.

*****

"Now, Joe, you want an extra five off your truck or not?" Bubba said. Les watched him twirl the phone line around his finger clockwise, then counterclockwise. "Mrs. Hyde can't compete in the fair with your wife's recipe. She just wants to have it for Thanksgiving." Bubba gave the phone line another twirl. "It's five hundred dollars. Okay, get back to me."

Bubba hung up. Les entered the office when Bubba waved to him through the open door.

"Have a seat," Bubba said. Les felt compelled to sit, as if Bubba's hand and voice had the command of a hypnotist's gold watch and chain. "I got to thinking how you don't have a car to go back to school this fall. And I felt bad, real bad."

"Mr. Denk," said Les, his voice cracking under the pressure of Bubba's spellbinding voice, "I've got to be going, sir."

"Hold on, son. Just let me say my piece." Bubba sat down with a big sigh. He rubbed his eyes with his thumb and pointer finger. He looked at Les, who shifted in his seat, looking anywhere but at Bubba Denk. "Son, I think you've heard about the unpleasantness between your father and me. It's no secret. The townfolk have spoken at both our expenses, but your father has been involved in gossip most undeservedly. He is a much better person than I could ever hope to be. And I'm glad to see you're following so faithfully in his honest footsteps."

Les felt his ears begin to burn and his forehead to cool. He looked at his hands and saw droplets of sweat where the lines converged in his palms. He looked over his shoulder at the door, but he didn't have the strength to get up and run back across the street.

"My boy," Bubba began, his voice coming from deep in the

throat as if the words were being squeezed out like a sob, "my boy isn't good like you, Les. No, don't say a word. I failed my son, somehow, and because of his time in the delinquent home, his license and many other privileges have been taken away from him. I can't give him anything, Les. It's as if my son has been taken away because I can't give him leave to stay out late with his friends. The customers don't trust him like they do you, so your father has the pleasure, the satisfaction, of giving you work in his dealership. How proud he must be." Bubba looked sadly at Les. His hands were folded together in front of his chin as if in prayer. The eyes were forbidding; they held out temptation. Les stared at the hands.

"Les, I own a dealership like your father. I can only hope to aspire to something as marvelous as he has built over the years. But Les, even though I own this dealership, and all those beautiful cars out there, I can't give my son, my very own son, a car of his own. Now, I have a favor to ask of you. And you would help ease my grieving heart, a troubled heart mourning over my failure with my boy. Will you help me out?"

"I guess so, sir." Les watched Bubba's mouth move and the words seemed to slide over him without meaning. His mind was figuring ways out of this trap. Even the sun seemed to have difficulty getting into the room, and the rays that infiltrated wrestled with airborne dust around the edges of

the windows.

"I knew you were a good man." Bubba got out of his chair and walked to the window overlooking the used lot. He continued, "I want you to let me give you what I can't give my own son, Les. I want you to have the Camaro." Bubba turned to Les with a tearful smile. "Will you do me the favor of taking the Camaro?"

Les was silent a moment. He thought of an excuse and saw his escape. "No, sir, I couldn't take a car for free. My father wouldn't want me to do that." He smiled.

"Well, you're right. Your father is an honorable and proud man. Reason to be proud, too. But I know how we can get around that. Do you have some money saved up?"

"A little, but I really don't want a car from your lot, if you don't mind my saying so, Mr. Denk."

Bubba put his hand over his heart. Les knew the gesture was bogus, but there was charm to everything Bubba did. Anything so blatant had power. Les hated it and was fascinated by it.

"Now you have wounded me to the quick, my boy."

"It's not that I would be ashamed to have the Denk name on a car of mine or anything, Mr. Denk, it's just that it wouldn't seem right," said Les. He felt his ears grow pinker. He wondered why he couldn't wiggle his way out of here with a lie. Why was it that he knew he was in the right, but because of his age, it made it so much more difficult to leave?

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to patronize, and you're as proud a man as your father and I've made this sound like an act of charity. So I'll tell you what I'll do," Bubba said, sitting back behind his desk. He reached into his top drawer and pulled out a set of keys. "Here are the keys to the Camaro which is yours for the same price I got it. Four hundred fifty dollars. Is it a deal? You don't have to worry about me. I'll break even that way."

Les deceived himself for an instant with the possibility that his father could sell it for two or three times as much. His father might think him shrewd. But it was the principle of the matter.

"No thanks, Mr. Denk."

Les stood up. He knew he could resist the offer of the car. He felt strong and took a deep breath as he walked out, closing the office door behind him with a soft click. Les could hear faintly through the door a second click and a third until Bubba picked up his intercom line. He watched Bubba's secretary talk into the speaker.

"Mr. Joe Dingell on line one, Mr. Denk."

Bubba hit line one.

"She what?" Bubba said. "She wants a written contract, Joe? I guess we could arrange that. All right, see you Monday, then."

Les thought of running back to his father, telling him about the Dingells and their coveted sweet potato pone recipe.

He knew the one. Light as a sponge wrung dry, rich as a bowl of freshly cracked pecans, and beautiful as, well, the only beautiful image Les could imagine was the girl who sat behind him in English 101. If he didn't have a car, he couldn't ask her out. He'd only be able to stare at her doe eyes as they passed each other between classes.

Les saw Bubba walking toward him from his office, his arms swinging wide and fast. A spit of anger reached his tongue.

"Mr. Denk, I already told you no."

"Son, I think we both know of a deal that even you couldn't refuse." He wore the grin of a satisfied hunter.

Les knew that Bubba had discovered his soft underbelly.

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Les smiled as he pulled into traffic and crossed the street. The Taylor lot never looked so inviting. Warm and soft in the setting sun. Business could be profitable. Dog slobber hit his cheek and he turned a friendly face to the two canines hanging out the windows to either side of him. He patted the lean side of one, put the Camaro in park, tucked the key in his pocket, and went inside to tell his father maybe the business degree wasn't such a bad idea after all. He'd made an exquisite deal.

ALLIGATOR HEART

Paul sat in the dark of his office a moment before he reached for the briefcase beneath the desk. He glanced out the window onto Biscayne Boulevard and realized having an office with a view didn't do him all that much good. He never left before it was nearly dark anyway, and the bright outdoors only tantalized him during the long days. He imagined he could see the waves breaking white beyond the rows of office buildings, pounding onto skinny Miami beaches. Not many people vacationed in Miami anymore. Too cluttered, tourists shot at highway rest stops, and *Miami Vice* hadn't helped the city's reputation.

He heard the shuffle of papers from Tracy's desk. The gurgle of the wretched smelling forty-gallon fish tank right outside his door teased his ear. The bank seemed to think the fish were necessary to make this an authentic banking business set in the subtropics. The ceiling lights were switched off every evening at six in the back offices. The Board said they needed to save all the pennies they could. Far cheaper for those staying late to use desk lamps. It was almost nine and well past time to go home. Paul rubbed his eyes. He could smell the heavy scent of roast beef sandwich from lunch on his palms.

The drive home wouldn't be bad at this time of night. He would take Flagler Street past The Golden Strand and The Pan-

American, once fine hotels, but now surrounded by adult video rental stores and girlie shows. Peeling signs balanced precariously over the entrances to strip joints. He stood up and reached automatically for the chain of his green-shaded banker's lamp before he realized he had already snapped it off.

"Good night, Mr. Duncan."

"Night, Tracy," Paul said. "Go home. I don't want my first assistant to burn out."

"Just a couple of things to finish up."

Street light filtered through office doorways. His shadow glanced on the walls and then disappeared each time he passed out of a stream of light. The fish tank sputtered one more time. He looked over his shoulder involuntarily, breathed shallowly through his mouth so he wouldn't be able to smell the fish. His wife wanted to get a pet, but he didn't want to live under the same roof with anything furry, feathered, or covered in scales. It was bad enough that the occasional alligator was spotted in the man-made lakes and ditches around their neighborhood. Every once in a while, Fido or Kitty suddenly no longer showed up for supper.

Paul thought he saw a fish, black and yellow, floating, dead, near the top of the water. He went back and leaned forward with hands on his knees and peered with hopeful curiosity through the side of the tank. The fish turned out to be only a large bubble. Kissing fish, goldfish, and others

he couldn't name swam in dull circles, sometimes bumping into the glass. The white office walls looked distorted, crooked and swaying, through the glass and water. He stood up quickly and exhaled. He opened a door leading to the bank lobby, empty except for the security guard at the front now that the tellers had gone home.

The unoccupied desks and booths sat yellow and warm in the shadows of the dim safety lights. Even in the day, there wasn't much traffic through here. This was a businessman's bank. The men who ran it believed in uniformity in dress, in the work ethic, in a sterile work environment. The fish tank was their touch of personality. The bank set up loans and accounts for big money; while it had accounts for individuals, it preferred dealing with businesses. Accounts for individuals meant dealing with people on a more personal level, making decisions based on empathy and gut trust. Accounts for businesses meant looking at numbers, and speaking to men who only represented those numbers.

Paul's job was to collect on faulty loans. He might have to face the owner of the company, but usually not. Generally, the default was handled by some subordinate who came to Paul in place of the boss because the boss was too busy overseeing his three or four other businesses. It wasn't as if Paul were repossessing some father's car; his job was so nicely impersonal. He could go home and detatch himself from his work. He wished he hated his job more, though, some knife to

twist in his stomach. Nine hours of indifference five days a week couldn't be good for the soul.

The security guard snapped open the front door bolt.

"Thanks, Miguel."

"Good night, Mr. Duncan. I'd get your umbrella out. Looks like it's going to rain."

A breeze, sweet and soft, heavy perfume of Atlantic saltwater, brushed his hair as he stepped onto the sidewalk. Pebbles crunched underfoot on the cement. Paul pictured the grit scuffing lines and small holes into the fine leather bottoms of his new shoes. The air flowed under his jacket. Hot though it was, it felt better than the stale cool of air-conditioning. Dark clouds hung over the ocean a couple miles away. But Miami, white concrete and a jagged skyline, could look pretty in the evening. The sun shot off windows, pink. And the palm trees bowed in the wind, a promise of a coming rain, as he walked to the parking garage down the street.

Nine o'clock. The summer was drawing toward the longest day of the year, and the light lingered as if the sun were sorry to let go of another fiery afternoon.

He could hear the shuffling click of his loafers on the slick pavement of the garage floor. He would never admit to anyone that it bothered him to walk into the garage by himself late in the evening when most everyone else had gone home. He remembered what his grandparents said it was like to live in Miami when people went dancing every evening at the big

hotels, when streets were safe, when drugs were coffee and whiskey. From Paul's way of thinking, the atmosphere of Miami started changing in the late seventies and early eighties. That's what his neighbors told him, those that stayed in Miami. They said, Carter had called for the Mariel boatlift which led Castro to let out his thieves and asylum cases and send them the ninety miles to Florida shores. Drugs started pouring in around this time, too, which brought violence. Deterioration of what had been a glamorous beachtown was associated with both. The big band culture was replaced with gangs, and English was no longer the dominant language. American music was no longer the tune seeping from apartment windows. Street by street and home by home, drug gangs drove, and were still driving, peaceful residents to Coral Gables and Coconut Grove. Or farther north into Georgia, South Carolina, back to New York. Anywhere to get away from the fury. And unfortunately for the majority of the residents originally of Cuban, Colombian, or other Spanish-speaking descent, those who had nothing to do with the violence, they were identified with drugs anyway.

Sounds echoed between the concrete floor and ceiling, and faulty cool-blue lights bouncing on and off gave the impression of a bad action movie, right before the gunman jumps out from behind a column and lets go with his semi-automatic, a triumphant sneer on his face. Paul would worry about his secretary leaving late at night, but her husband

came to pick her up if she stayed anytime past eight, even though it meant leaving her car downtown overnight. He stopped for a moment. He thought he heard something behind him. He couldn't keep himself from pulling in a breath, and he took a swift look over his right shoulder. The fan that pulled exhaust out of the enclosed garage was starting up, the metal blades out of kilter and clanging against the safety screen that kept out hands and birds. He picked up his pace and felt some relief when he reached his car and locked the door once he got inside.

He pulled into the driveway, small house snug behind palmettos and banana trees, chameleons clinging to the screen around the porch. He turned off the windshield wipers and headlights. The rain had dropped to a slow dripping from the clouds. The house was dark except for a single light in the living room. He opened the door and pulled it shut promptly behind him to keep out the moths. One got inside. He grabbed a newspaper, rolled it up, smacked the moth against the screen. It fell to the tile. He'd pick it up later.

"Sandy, you home?"

"In here," she called from the bedroom.

He walked into the faint gray. He saw her form under a sheet, lying on her side, an arm draped over her hip. The room smelled of her perfume and the damp scent of soap and shower. Her hair hung over a cheek and mouth, and her eyes

slanted into a smile.

"Sorry I didn't stay up, sweet," she said. Her voice was coarse from being on the edge of sleep.

Paul sat on the bed, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"Rough day?" he asked.

"Had to rewrite my story at least five times. Phil didn't like my lead, and I had a headache."

"Stay in bed." he said. "I'm just going on a run." He leaned down and kissed her lightly on the forehead and she tilted her head back for a kiss on the mouth.

"Much better," she said.

He stepped outside, quiet now except for the trilling throaty sound of the crickets and the drops of leftover rain from leaf to leaf to ground. It felt momemtarily cool in the night air. He tucked his keys into one side shorts pocket and zipped it shut. He patted his right shoulder for his chest holster beneath his T-shirt. The leather case was stiff and dry with age. It chafed at the tender skin near his left underarm when he ran. He felt silly packing his uncle's .22, but the neighborhood had been going downhill fast in the last year or two. His uncle, who had also been a wary city-dweller, let him handle the revolver once when he was ten on a day-trip out to the country. It was sleek, heavy, and terrifying. It seemed different than what the Lone Ranger used or the brothers on *Bonanza*. Their guns were fast and

they meant justice, but this invention seemed a lot more complex and came with many rules. Paul had mentioned to Sandy he wanted to move soon, especially now that he had his promotion. With two salaries, they could afford something small in Coconut Grove. But it wasn't just because of gangs that he carried a revolver. He didn't tell Sandy that he didn't have a license for a concealed weapon, although he had a feeling she knew. The gun came to him after his uncle's suicide a year before. Worked too hard was the verdict. It was a miscellaneous item bequeathed to him with a few thousand dollars in a will written long before his uncle ever considered the final use for the gun. Paul hadn't been able to throw it out. Sandy told him it was a horrible thing to have sitting around, and even though she didn't like guns, if he would just get a new one to replace his uncle's, she'd feel much better.

But the revolver was also for the alligators. Paul ran by ditches, sometimes filled with rainwater, and along a path by a man-made lake where the big ones lived, if any were around at all. Tall grasses lined the edges, vines creeping ankle deep next to the jogging path. Alligators were known to make their way out. They aren't discriminating eaters. They can take a chunk out of whatever comes their way, not just dog and cat, and only then decide if it's right for the diet. Their sense of taste comes from inside their terrific jaws; they aren't graced with a delicate organ like the human nose.

It was a short portion of the footpath that he ran that passed along a particularly grassy trench next to the lake, but it made him feel better to have protection. To be honest, he had never seen an alligator, or a kid thug for that matter. A bullet wouldn't do much against an alligator. It would just bounce off the scales. His neighbor, an old guy with an extensive rifle collection who used to hunt alligators before endangered species laws made it too much trouble, told him the only way to kill one is to shoot it behind the back of its head or right in the eye. But Paul's .22 made him feel that much more secure around the weeds.

He ran down the street. Under the lights, flying bugs clung to his five o'clock shadow and flickered through his hair. He swept them away, and felt one squash under the weight of his hand. In the light of the next street lamp, he saw bug pus on his finger and wiped the finger clean on his shorts.

He had grown up in the north. He could never get over the air in Miami. It didn't sting his nose and throat, but went down like honey. The air stroked his skin like cotton candy. He took a right onto a side path near the lake. No lights here. In spite of the possibility of alligators or because of it, it was a thrill, a physical challenge he faced each night, to make himself take this path. So different from work. He felt a pleasing kind of phobia, of things that hissed and slithered and whipped through water. Sweat

gathered in his palms from fear rather than heat or humidity. A rustle in the grasses made his stomach knot; he reacted to sensation.

He reached the end of the kudzu-encased path and turned down another neighborhood street. Around here, it was difficult to realize there was a large city only a couple miles away. Here was a neighborhood with swing sets and gardens. But there was always the feeling, as of a stranger getting too close on a subway, of the city creeping ever nearer to the family homes. If he looked at his feet, the pavement made up of stone and crushed shell seemed to flow like a small river beneath him. Night made everything appear to happen faster because streets and bats, trees and people seemed to pop out from the darkness.

The houses on either side were small. He could hear Spanish seeping toward him through screen doors. The speakers talked quickly or maybe it seemed that way because he couldn't understand them. He didn't know one Spanish word from another beyond "Hola" and "Si." A woman's voice rose above all the rest as she was trying to make a child obey. A young voice shrieked in protest and then changed tone with "Si, si!" An ancient boulevard barge rolled by, brushing Paul with the passing breeze. It rounded a street corner.

He took a left turn toward the last part of his run. Railroad tracks and an open field were beyond, cleared of subtropical growth, ready for homes. A wind pushed lightly

from behind, and he went over the railroad tracks. He hopped over the first rail, gravel scraping like grinding teeth, and then over the second. The train ran by every night at seven. Sometimes, when he and Sandy got home early enough to get exercise, their long walks would take them by the tracks. They would watch the train thunder past, blowing its whistle. The sound felt as if it were cutting down deep inside. Sandy would grimace and plug her ears. Paul never blocked his. *Let it blast. Deafen me if you dare.* The railroad cars would blur past them and draw their gazes away from the downtown toward countryside uncut by steel structures, only mugginess sliced through by the click of a disturbed cicada.

He sprinted to the end of the open space beyond the circle of light from a street lamp before he turned around. He felt the heat pouring up from the sandy earth. The sun that had baked the dirt all day now warmed his feet, his legs, his belly. Grit settled on his gums as he heaved a breath through his dry mouth. He returned to the tracks and noticed an old, large car sitting ahead at the edge of the clearing to his left. Engine off. Headlights off. From the light in the background, he thought it was the same one that passed him on the street. He saw two figures sitting in it. He detected then another man standing between him and the street. Paul kept on running, but he slowed down as he tried to find a way around the man. He suddenly noticed how quiet the area was. The rhythmic churning of his steps was muffled as he veered

off the path into tall grasses, and he took smaller breaths as if to sharpen his other senses by silencing the loud, heavy gasps. A parrot screamed into the night from a nearby porch.

The lone man picked up a plank from the ground. He raised an arm in greeting, or more like a gesture indicating he'd like Paul to stop. And there was the board in his other hand. Paul stayed to the right in the wild grasses and increased his pace while he mirrored the other man's arm motion. The man walked fluidly toward him. Panic spread to the ends of his fingers. He felt the grasses wrapping around his ankles and tearing at his skin. He knew now he should have shot off in the other direction, back across the lot, even though it meant going through strange territory, through untamed growth, and away from his home. The man was a silhouetted, faceless figure except for his eyes, those gray-black unblinking holes. The more Paul stared back the more he knew he angered the man with the plank.

Suddenly, the man burst toward him. Paul didn't have time to duck as a boyish, high voice, a kid, said, "Why don't you say good evening," and he let the board fly. The wood came down across Paul's shoulders, sending him to his knees. The boy tore to his side and grabbed for the board, and then he beat another crack on the back of Paul's head. The car headlights went on as if he and this kid were on a stage. Even with the ground swimming up to his face, he could smell the alcohol from the youth's shout as the kid again struck the

side of his head. He felt splinters slide into his skin. The side of his head felt cool like boiling water on the back of the hand before the sharp sting of heat. The coolness lasted for a moment before the blood slid down his cheek and ran off his nose. A pricking sensation began on the back and side of his scalp. He remembered that the head bleeds profusely. "You should be afraid of me," the kid said, this time aiming the board for his stomach, rolling him onto his back as Paul held off some of the blow with an arm. Paul saw half of the boy's face in the car's lights. Eyes smug, full mouth, high cheekbones, dark outgrown crewcut hair. He was not big-boned. Paul felt that if this were some other arena, he could take this kid on, outrun him, maybe outbox him. The boy raised the board again. Paul got back on his knees, leaning on arms and legs, an animal on all fours. "Why don't you fight?" the kid said. The boy wiped his forehead with an arm. Perspiration from heat and effort held his cropped hair far back off his face.

Small, sharp stones stuck deep into Paul's knees, his T-shirt bagging down into the dirt. Paul held onto his side where the board had struck him and felt the strap of the leather holster. He let his hand glide up the holster belt until his fingertips grazed the revolver handle, smooth and icy to the touch. He wrapped his hand around the gun. The holster itself was slick and large compared to the grip of the .22. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the plank

still high in the air, waiting to fall. The parrot yelled again. Paul let go of thought. He took the handle in his fist, and he stretched out his arm with the revolver, cooler than his skin and solid, more solid than the plank or the boy would ever be, touched the boy on his side and pulled the trigger. The gun made a sound like a stubborn light switch. For a moment, the kid's face was still arrogant and mean, and then his mouth popped slightly open. Eyes that had been glaring turned round and wide, and Paul could almost imagine the boy felt as oddly chilled as he had when he first saw the silent car.

His cat-like grace gone, the boy skipped his way back to the car, bending over deeper and deeper until someone in the front seat pulled him in and the engine started. As they turned onto the road, the light from the headlights skimmed over Paul's face a final time and he saw three pairs of eyes.

It was dark and silent. The air was no longer rich, but sickeningly sweet as his blood mixed with the dirt. It was too warm and dusty to breathe. He tried to throw up, but there was nothing except the hollow sound of air, and red spit falling in a thin line from the side of his mouth.

The police told him there were kids like this everywhere in town. The assault could have been part of a gang initiation. The police officers doubted they'd find him even if they had the time to check out the local hospitals.

"Could also have one of his friends patch him up if you didn't get him too badly," a policeman said. "Or maybe he'll turn up dead in an alley. These kids grow up in a tough world."

Paul wanted the boy in jail. Sandy had muttered, "I hope he's in an alley," and then she blushed, but there was no apologetic smile on her face.

"No leaving town until you hear from us," the officer said. "If we don't find the kid, well, there's not much to file, but we need to talk with you about this unlicensed weapon of yours."

"We'll start regular patrols in the area for the next week anyway," the other police officer said. The police car lights were blinking red and blue through the open door. "I'd suggest you not go out late at night for a while." He paused to smirk. "His friends may be cruising around for the next few days. Give them time to cool off."

"Yes, Officer," said Paul. He reached for Sandy's hand.

"I think we ought to get an alarm system for the house," Sandy said Friday morning.

She cupped his face lightly in her hands, careful not to touch his stitches. He hadn't needed many, but there was a small bald patch where the doctor shaved away the hair. When Paul had come home Thursday night, Sandy's face turned ghostly white, and when she called the police, her fingers shook over

the phone. After the first shock passed, she regained her color and her cheeks burned. She washed his face and the back of his head gently, but her arms were tense. The police said for her to call them again once she and Paul got home from the hospital. She did. They waited for the police to arrive. They sat silently in the living room. Paul had to keep his hands in his lap to stop himself from fingering the patch over his stitches. He didn't seek comfort from Sandy other than her presence across the room. He saw Sandy eyeing the gun, lying now on the chest next to the front door. When he inherited the .22, he offered it to her, since her job often kept her until after dark. She said she would never use it. She wouldn't even touch it, but after the attack before the police took it away he caught her running her hand lightly over the barrel.

He called the office on Friday and explained as briefly as possible what happened. He said he figured he'd be in on Monday, but he felt ashamed and weak. Like a sick man. A truly smart man watches out for his health, an organized man doesn't have to overwork, a prudent man doesn't run by railroad tracks late at night. He knew why animals don't like sympathy when wounded. It exposed vulnerability, mortality. His skin was not impenetrable but was ripped, bound together by fine thread, so fine he could snap it with his fingers with one good tug. He didn't bathe. Water slows the healing process, makes the skin soft, easier to shred further.

When he tried shaving that morning, the mirror showed him what the boy had seen the night before. Some pasty officeworker with skinny biceps and hamstrings, and ears that stuck out a little too far from the sides of his head. It was the same physique he despised in high school. He touched a cut above one eye and a black and purple bruise over his left cheekbone. He couldn't intimidate a teenager probably five whole years from being a man. He hadn't run fast enough, reacted quickly enough, and had to resort to a bit of steel and powder because office work dulled his senses like the silly kissing fish which wheeled endlessly in the same waters.

He was sure *they* were looking for *him*. He wasn't the one who had threatened the kids; the boy attacked *him*. They knew what he looked like from the headlights running over his face, while they were only shadows with gleaming eyes. He had to tell the police he wasn't sure he could identify the boy even if they picked him up. And so now he was the one who had to hide out in his home every night as if he were some five-year-old boy, who might get picked up by a stranger. He covered the mirror with a towel and went back to bed.

Sandy left for work with a worried look. "I'll call," she said. He thought she seemed shy around him suddenly. He noticed she didn't kiss him on the mouth that morning, but placed a light touch on his chin. She looked away when in a brave moment he tried to meet her eyes with his. She blew him a kiss on her way out the door.

He slept all morning and afternoon, only going so far as to dress in jeans and T-shirt. He left his pajamas on the floor next to the bed. The *Miami Herald* lay unread at the foot of the stairs. When Sandy came home, she found him still under the covers. She brought him a bowl of soup without a word, which he ate, and then they went to sleep with her cheek on his shoulder and an arm resting across his chest.

The sheets tightened around his legs as he turned once again. In his sleep, he pulled the sheet over his head, his pillow tight against his neck. Sandy woke him.

"Are you hot?" she said, taking her hand away from his forehead. She took the sheet off him and opened a window.

Paul felt warmth coming off his chest, and he pulled the sheets closer, absently reaching to the floor for a blanket and coming up with discarded clothes. These he held on to. The air was cooling off outside.

"Feels better with a breeze now, doesn't it?" she said. She tried taking the clothes away from him, but he clung to his covers. He burrowed deep under the blanket and laundry, exposing only his nose.

"I'm going to the grocery," Sandy said when she found Paul sitting in the living room reading Saturday's *Herald*. "Anything you want special?"

"Want me to come?" he asked.

"I'll just be a few minutes," she said. He thought she hurried to get out the door.

Paul watched her get into her Honda Civic. She put on her seat belt, but didn't lock the door. He'd have to talk to her about that. He looked about the room and realized how exposed they were in their own home. The inside was bright with morning sunshine filtering through the windows. The rear door was glass down to the carpeting. He walked to the storage shed in back and rummaged around for a handful of nails and a hammer on the tool bench.

He remembered reading about a number of steps to secure a home before leaving on a trip. One of these was nailing the windows shut. A thief could break the glass, but he wouldn't be able to easily get the nails out without a pair of pliers. Paul hammered the front and side living room windows, two nails to each. Every thud of the hammer echoed painfully in his head. He moved into the dining room before he heard the car door shut and Sandy come in the front.

"I'm home," she said. He put the hammer in his back pocket and took the two bags cradled in her arms. She pulled out the hammer as he walked into the kitchen.

"What are you up to?" she said. "You must be feeling better."

"I'm just doing some work that should have been done some time ago," he said. "Try opening the front windows."

Sandy unlatched a lock. "It won't budge."

"I'm nailing all the windows, even in the bedroom."

"But the wood," she said. She ran her right hand over the panels. She spoke to the floor. "If you feel you have to do this, I think you're supposed to drill holes first so the nails can slip easily in and out like they did next door. That way we can open the windows if we want or get out if there's a fire."

He felt his cheeks growing warm. "We want to be safe, don't we?" He was going to add, "And by the way, remember to lock the car door when you're driving around town," but Sandy was already removing the nails with the hammer claw one by one.

By Monday morning, the swelling had gone down.

"Doug called," she said, throwing back the sheets. "He needs you at the office to help him with a meeting with the Board of Directors."

There was a thin trail of blood on his pillowcase from the cut on the back of his head. He stared at his face in the mirror. Three-day growth. Actually four days, if he counted all day Thursday. The Board wouldn't approve. He splashed warm water on his face and lathered up the beard, but the beard spread his jaw out wider, more square. He liked it. If he tightened his jaw muscles, loosen, tighten, loosen, they seemed larger. He let an eye tooth hang out over his lower lip with a scowl, then rinsed off the suds. He would leave

it.

"You going to pick up your clothes?" Sandy asked him, studying the growing pile on the carpet and the bed.

"Later," he said. She stared him in the eyes. "I'll get them when I come home. No one's here all day anyway, so what's the difference?"

"Just asking," she said, putting on her earrings and heading to the kitchen. "Cereal okay?"

He slipped into his shoes and followed her down.

"Mother wants us to look after her cat while she's on her trip," she said. "She's dropping her off tomorrow."

"Again? Didn't we look after the beast three weeks ago?"

Sandy placed two bowls on the counter top and got two spoons out of the silverware drawer.

"If you don't feel well enough, I can call Doug back for you," she said.

"I feel fine," he said, "I need to get out of here for a while."

"Are you sure you're all right?"

"Didn't I say so?"

"Don't snap at me," she said, and walked to the dining room table with the milk. "I was scared, too, you know."

Miguel opened the front door for him when he got to the bank, and bolted it behind him. It would be another two hours before the lobby opened. The air-conditioning made Paul want

to step back into the sunshine.

"Morning, Mr. Duncan," Miguel said. Paul thought he saw him staring at his face.

"Morning. Good weekend?"

"Yes, sir."

Paul walked on before he could ask about his stitching. Doug came from the back offices.

"Paul," he said, "how are you feeling? That's a nasty cut."

Doug reached out to straighten Paul's tie and fix the suit collar. "Did you get dressed in the dark?"

"I was in a hurry."

"Looks like you forgot to shave, too," Doug said. "Old man Boren's not going to like that." Paul felt Doug's eyes linger on his face. The bruise was a greenish-yellow color above the cheekbone now. Paul pretended to scratch his eyebrow to cover it up.

"So what's the meeting about? They have some new gripe?" Paul asked.

"Don't worry, buddy, I'll do the talking."

"I can help out."

"That's okay, you missed Friday," Doug said. "I just needed some moral support when I tell them we all need five-percent raises, updated computers, and more travel money to collect old loans. You know, the usual small requests. You look kind of tired. You okay?"

Doug slapped him on the shoulder and walked ahead into the boardroom.

Paul sat at the back watching Doug make his presentation. He wanted to sit where no one could stare at him. He wondered how noticeable the marks on his face were. No one was looking at him. He wasn't sure if that was good or not. Maybe they were too embarrassed to look him in the eye. Boren's right-hand man, Ethan, a clumsy white-haired fellow who always wore suits a little too tight, had taken him aside when he first entered and gave him a concerned avuncular welcome back, anything we can do for you let us know, but Boren didn't so much as raise a hand of salutation. He thought he would be grateful to be passed over for the most part, and this group wasn't especially sociable anyway, but it just went to remind him the nature of his work.

He took a sip of his coffee. It was weak even though it looked black. The florescent bulbs gave off a dead white light. A room of corpses in suits and ties. He thought about the commute and how this morning when he passed by one of the strip joints he saw a woman walk out a side entrance. He imagined orange and red lights inside the bar, how warm it must be in there from cigarettes and desire, and how filthy the floor with dirt ground into the vinyl squares. The Board Members sat around the large oval table in the center of the stark room. Drab men. Neither extreme was inviting.

"...to keep up with the cost of living," Doug said. "No

one can afford to live in anything less than Coral Gables with an alarm system hooked up to each window."

Boren sat up straight. "We aren't the profit-churning machine our employees seem to think we are."

"But cost of living," Doug said. "Surely you know what people pay for food and insurance around here?"

They slowly blinked. Their sagging chins rested on their fists. No one gave Doug a nod of encouragement. *Of course, why should they?* Paul thought. The warmth had drained from Ethan. Doug was asking them to spend more money when times were tight. The kid had asked Paul to hand over his cash and he'd pulled out a gun, instead. It would be too much to imagine that one of these old guys had a gun in his pocket, was slowly pulling it out with a finger on the trigger, ready to end this discussion right here and now. Paul hoped they were at least as tired as he was of banking and work and traffic jams.

"As usual, Doug," Boren said, "we'll take this into consideration when we work out the next quarterly budget."

Doug smiled agreeably before turning toward Paul, arching his eyebrows and letting out a sigh.

"Let me turn your attention to our travel expenses..." he said.

Paul's eyes burned. He'd acted like a coward the night he looked the kid in the eyes, and even Sandy detected it. That's why she was mad. She no longer ran her hands playfully

through his hair. Cash kept them denned up in homes, in cold offices, and in locked cars as they drove through downtown Miami, beautiful royal palms outside.

Paul looked up from his coffee and saw Boren scowling at him. Boren absently pulled at his bare jawline until he caught Paul's gaze and he turned away. Paul scanned the room. They were all ignoring him. Usually they asked him questions if Doug paused. He ground his heel into the carpet. The soft fibers yielded to the edge of his shoe.

The sting in his eyes made them water, and he pretended for a moment that he was looking through a thick glass window. He was not a part of their world any longer. He felt and they did not. Did these men realize that the loans and interest rates and defaults they thought about each day had nothing to do with what was really going on in this city? People were mauled in side streets and sharks churned the seas, while sane people stayed holed up at home. Paul knew the outcome of this meeting. People who didn't feel were much too easy to predict.

He banged his mug on a table next to his seat. He looked up, but still no one turned his way. His face burned and the warmth spread down his neck. Coffee slid up the side of the cup and over the rim onto his hand and formed a small pool on the table. He pulled a handkerchief out of his back pocket to mop up the spill.

He suddenly felt as if he couldn't breathe. He put a

finger through the knot of his tie, yanking it loose. The room was fading. His head throbbed where the stitching was. He wanted something cool. Maybe the plank had done more damage than the doctors thought. He put a hand to his face to try to clear away the black spots from before his eyes. His skin was cold, and he scratched it with a fingernail to see if it still had feeling. He almost knocked over his chair in the hurry to get up and out of the room. Only Doug looked at him. Paul passed by the recording secretary, who was scribbling shorthand on a yellow legal pad.

He was in the hallway. His right hand was still on the knot of his tie as he pushed open the door to the men's room. His left hand grasped the edge of the marble sink counter. The stone was cold from the air-conditioning. He turned on the tap and bent over to wet his face under the running water, but he knocked his forehead on the faucet. He checked for a bump in his reflection. He was like an old man constantly checking for signs of decay. He was top heavy, as if his head would pull the rest of him down to the floor. The black circles were fading. If he could just sit down in his office.

To his left, the fish tank bubbled. For the first time, it didn't smell, even though flakes of food formed scum on top of the water. It looked cool in the tank. A fake pool blue. Bubbles rose in streams to the top. He gripped the edges of the tank for balance. A fish swooped to the top and caught a bite of food in its perfectly round, open, pink mouth. He

began to have trouble breathing again, and the hum of the air-conditioner masked a conversation he could see Tracy was having over the phone. His jaw grew tight and his stomach and chest tensed like they always did when he wanted to get away from something like a speech that droned on and on and seemed to eat away minute after minute of his life.

A sob tried to choke its way up his throat and he stopped it with one pitch of his arms. The tank tilted on the edge of its stand and gravity won as the water lurched to one side and pulled it down toward the carpet. The glass cracked. A plastic castle and green plastic weeds tumbled onto the floor at his feet. Water ran over the black leather of his shoes. The light beige rug became a clean, deep brown. He heard Tracy hang up the phone.

"Mr. Duncan, are you all right?" She didn't say it loudly, but gently as if maybe she actually cared.

A delicate pink kissing fish caught his eye as it struggled. Its tail slapped hopelessly on the rug.

"Could you pick up the fish, Tracy?" he said.

He proceeded past her into his office, picked up his keys, and went home.

"How'd the day go?" Sandy asked as she came through the front door.

"Fine," he said. He was seated in an armchair ignoring the newspaper on his lap.

"Doug called me and asked if you were okay," she said. "He told me you left the meeting." She took off her heels.

"I was bored."

"Looks like the stitching's holding," she said, pushing the hair aside. She sat on the edge of his armrest.

"I don't need coddling," he said and waved away her hand.

"Good. When you decide you've made it past adolescence, let me know," she said. She walked to the bedroom.

He stood up and let the newspaper drop to the floor.

"I picked up dinner on the way home," he said. "It's ready if you want to eat."

He caught a last glimpse of her bare feet before she turned the corner. "I thought I was hungry, but I don't think I am anymore," she said.

The bedroom door shut. The closet door opened, shoes dropped to the floor. Patter, patter. She turned on the shower. He felt his stitching. A scab had formed. He was surprised at first and then remembered he had snagged it with a comb that morning. He tapped the scab lightly and it made a sound like water dripping onto plastic.

He went into the kitchen and pulled the take-out roast chicken from the oven. He placed it on the counter. He felt saliva build in his mouth and he sniffed at the bird. He saw the spices and warm greasy skin. He felt the heat. He tore off a leg and pushed it into his mouth so his teeth sank into meat down to the bone. He yanked. The chicken slid hot onto

his tongue, and juices ran over his chin. When he took a second bite, he heard the bone crack beneath his teeth. A sliver of bone caught under the gum behind a front tooth. He cried out, and went into the half-bath off the kitchen to pull the splinter out with a pair of tweezers. When he was done, he went back into the kitchen, but the bird no longer looked appetizing. He put it into the refrigerator.

He was tired. He stared out the back window. He never wanted to go back to work. He scored his fingers through his beard. If he tried, he could almost catch the hairs between his fingers and give them a light tug. Paul walked to the front porch. He sat and counted the chameleons. He could hear the shower running. The chameleons lay against the screen, stomachs puffing with quick breaths. Then one would dart up, another would dart down and jump, dropping into the vegetation beneath. His legs itched as if they needed a good stretch. He had to get out. He never seemed able to escape being suffocated. He wasn't going to be trapped inside these walls. He'd leave a note for Sandy to say he'd gone for a run, but he couldn't tell her because she'd say, "Oh, no, remember what the police said," and then he'd feel too guilty to go. At least this way he might be back before she saw the note. If he could prove he wasn't scared, maybe she would forget his behavior these past few days.

He went inside, grabbed his keys, and looked for the revolver until he remembered the police had taken it. He

found an old pocket knife in his top dresser drawer and tucked that in a side pocket. He wrote the note for Sandy and headed out, locking the door behind him.

The street streamed beneath his feet. After a while he walked to get his wind back. He scoured the ground around him until he found a good-sized stick. He brandished it like a sword. He tucked it under his arm and held out his hands. They were steady. He turned them over and in the light of a street lamp, he saw there was no sweat in the creases of his palms. He ran his right hand down his side to make sure the knife was still there. Ahead was the railroad track, dry grasses and empty lot. All quiet. He scratched at the dirt at his feet with the toe of his running shoes, and then sat on a dusty track and waited. If they found him, they would kill him. He pretended he didn't care, but he looked for a suitable patch of growth at the edge of the field where he could crouch. He told himself he would study his prey before he leapt, knife like a deadly jaw in his hand, and he would hiss and bellow and show them who had tougher skin and character and animal power. If he caught one, he would shake him like an alligator shakes a poisonous snake to its death before consuming it between its long, wicked teeth. Nothing could open his jaws to release them, muscles so tight the bone would break before they'd give way. He tucked his upper lip under so that his teeth could shine brightly in the moonlight, and he glared around him. The weaker ones he would devour

whole. They would be scared of his look even before they saw the knife and club in his hand. Maybe he would leave the knife behind, and they would see only his eyes and bolt for their car and leave for good.

The air was cool tonight, first time in weeks. A shower was on its way, but it would be a while. Once it fell, steam would rise from the sun-stroked pavement, and he would be able to see the vapor under the streetlight. He heard the tires of a car approaching, slowly rolling over the street and the loose pebbles and shells that had worked their way free of the asphalt. He was still in the dark and got ready to bolt for the greenery to his left. He didn't move. His back stiffened. He felt for a moment as if a body might be creeping up behind him, the car coming toward him in front, reptiles marching out of the subtropical growth to his sides. The fender of the car came around the corner, headlights stealing the dark. The beam didn't reach him. The car went past before he could identify its make. The imaginary danger slipped away with the car. The heat of fear that had gathered in his cheeks and around his spine subsided, cooled by a growing breeze. A bird flew overhead, pushed by the wind, and ozone stung his nostrils before he grew used to its thick scent.

He pictured the boy coming toward him again, fluent movement of his limbs, the clothes ridiculously adult because they were too big for his frame. So he visualized the boy as

the boy wanted others to see him. Paul ignored the silly gang uniform in his image and focused on the face. It tried to look tough with pouting mouth, snarling to one side, but the skin wasn't tough. If the boy appeared and walked toward him now, Paul felt he would take up a plank and beat him back, and he would see the look of fear in the boy's eyes once again as he had looked when he heard the pop of the revolver. The boy would be in pain, and he would be scared and want to hide in the untamed Florida underbrush to get away from this madman. He would be frightened of dark and shadows and alligators and whatever was hidden behind columns in downtown garages. And of whatever boredom blunted him into a sluggish human being.

The rail felt too hard beneath him. He looked slowly around him. Moths buzzed up to the street lamp, knocking their wings against the light, falling back, and trying again. He got up, rubbed the red impression left on his legs by the track. Palm tree leaves rustled like discarded newspaper. He breathed through his nose, but couldn't get the honeyed air in fast enough and he opened his mouth to fill his chest. His legs itched again and he wanted to run. He was tired of waiting.

He would shave. When he got the revolver back from the police, he would take it apart and throw a piece of it away each week. He would do the same with the bullets, throw one away each week. He would go to work and feign dullness to get ahead, but really he'd be quick and alert and he'd know what

the Board Members were going to say and do before they knew because he'd watch their faces. He wouldn't look over his shoulder in the garage. He would admit signs of life and spirit only to his wife and their friends. They would know he was alive and well because he would laugh a lot, and he would enjoy every waking moment. He would never let Sandy out of his sight once they got home from work. He would put his clothes away and clear off the floor on his side of the room. He would take his wife's hand in his and they would walk to the railroad tracks and watch the train explode past, its metal wheels clawing the steel rails and scraping them clean.

FIVE MINUTES

Morley pulled his truck into the lot next to the Mississippi with a crunch of gravel beneath his tires. He looked to his left at the empty beach. Max, his dog, stepped onto his lap to peer out the window, his nails digging into Morley's legs. The sun was about an hour from setting on another sticky day in July.

Morley and Max got out and walked to a log at the edge of the water. The log had probably fallen from a passing barge and floated to shore. The top and sides had been smoothed by weather over time. Morley came here evenings before work at the Floating Casino where he played the trumpet. He didn't like to be at home at this waning hour of day.

The house always seemed emptiest at suppertime. It was around this hour two years before that he discovered his wife had left for good. Mornings felt peopled with expectation somehow; they were more bearable. Morley and his wife had lived in the same Illinois town for thirty years. News of the divorce didn't take long to spread. After thirty-four years of marriage, Betty had accused him of having no stomach for adventure. She said there had been days she felt as if she were dead because they had done so little in their lives. He wondered why it had taken her thirty-four years to say something, why a mature woman should leave for a reason like that, should act like that. For months after she left, he would sit in their living room in the afternoons until it grew

dark and it was time to go to work. It was in the quiet and the shadows that he would wonder if maybe he really was that boring.

He never thought of dating other women. Even though he was now free to do what he liked, he didn't grab a drink with the boys on weekends. He didn't like the way the men seemed to blame him and the women pitied him.

He was grateful his work occupied his evenings in a routine he had followed for decades. Dinner at seven, to work by nine. He loved to play the trumpet, and the casino was one of the few places around with a band, unless he wanted to drive into St. Louis. Now that he was getting his Social Security, Morley didn't need to work anymore. Music was just something he liked to do. It got him out of the house. He didn't want to see Betty again unless she were coming back to stay. Out of habit, he still slept on his side of the bed. He licked the callous on the edge of his upper lip. Max mimicked him with a nervous swing of his long, pink tongue, and a wide yawn.

As folks entered town over the bridge from Missouri, they saw grain elevators with a large American flag painted across a line of four of them and the words, "Welcome to Alton, Illinois," and then the gaudy pink and white stripe awning of the Floating Casino anchored in the river next to them. When Morley was a boy growing up along the Mississippi, gambling was done in the back rooms of the less reputable taverns, if

there was such a thing as a reputable tavern. Even children knew, though, where to find dice and card games. Before he reached the age of ten, Morley had peered through the back windows and torn curtains of the Riverbed Bar many times, had watched the cigarette smoke twist from the mouths of cardsharks like old Bud with his tangled, graying hair. Cards and money were thrown onto the center of a carved-up dining room table with a sloppy flip of the wrist. Morley would go to his treehouse with a couple of friends and imitate Bud with cigarette butts they found outside the bar.

A movement caught Morley's attention. On an island in the middle of the river, a man was loading his fishing gear into a rowboat. He went into the shelter of leaves and picked up a folding lawn chair, which he collapsed, and put that in the boat, too. He looked happily overfed, yet a neat sort whose T-shirt was tucked into his jeans.

There were islands wider than this one upriver. People built homes on them, raised them on stilts that rusted or rotted within a few years. Morley never saw the sense in a house constructed on a low-lying piece of ground. The Mississippi flooded the area regularly. His childhood home was on a hill three blocks from the river. The Mississippi rose dangerously high more than once in the sixty-odd years he had lived, off and on, near the river. When he was seven, he sat on the front steps of his house watching the river churn past, the water licking the tops of the sandbags. He got to

drink a lot of pop while the tap water was contaminated. Now from his house on a bluff, he admired the river's twists and turns, its changing colors, the faded barges with dwarfed towboats pushing like a kid behind a shopping cart. At night, even from the top of the bluffs, it was possible to see into the interior of the towboats where the bargemen gathered around tables drinking coffee.

A semi whined past. The sun was about fifteen minutes from retiring gently into a pocket of trees.

"Well, boy," Morley said to Max, "I guess it's time we move on." He brushed off the back of his shorts. His black evening trousers were in a bag in the truck so Max couldn't shed on them. He was wearing a pair of old sneakers. He didn't like to wreck the soles of his good loafers with driving so he waited until he got to work to change.

Max looked at him, his mouth hanging open, tongue dripping to the side. He got up, wagging his tail and shaking his brown and black speckled body. Morley could swear that Max knew how to smile, the way he'd draw back his loose dog lips, baring his teeth, but he was probably just heaving in a big breath.

Morley's boss, Ed, let him leave Max in the back office of the casino. The dog rarely barked, but Morley thought Ed was a nice guy just the same. Ed worked on the account books while listening to records of Glenn Miller and Benny Goodman. He'd try to hum along. Sometimes, he would have the casino

band in after closing, and they'd listen to his records, eating the leftover pretzels in the baskets from the gaming tables, talking until it began to get light outside. Most of the guys didn't have families. They were drifters. Maybe a couple of them had done the abandoning. They would talk about their days in real bands, not second-rate floating casinos, but places with class in Chicago and New York. Those big city band experiences in the first years of his marriage made up the only period Morley got out of Alton. Betty had laughed and said, "What a boring life we lead."

He slammed his truck door shut and stuck the key in the ignition. Max whispered his wet nose in Morley's ear and sneezed.

"Max, why do you do that?" he asked.

Morley pulled a handkerchief out of his back pocket and rubbed his ear vigorously, then noticed a spot on the outside of the windshield. He got out of the truck and wiped away the smudge. He saw that the man in the rowboat was making his way across the river. The sun flashed on the boat's dull metal. The man was making good progress with a couple hundred feet to go. Then Morley also saw a log barrelling down the river. He shouted to the man.

"Hey, mister," Morley yelled. The man didn't hear him, so Morley yelled again. "Hey, mister." This time the man turned around, but it was too late. The log about a foot and a half wide and twenty feet long hit the boat broadside,

pushing underneath, and over went man, boat, oars, fishing gear, and chair. The man tipped up and over easily with the boat, but the top edge came down on his head. Morley felt as if he could hear the soft thud and echo of metal against his skull. He ran to the river. The man was closer to the island than the Illinois shoreline. Morley hollered as loudly as possible.

"You okay?" As soon as he looked more carefully, Morley could tell that the man was struggling. The man slipped underwater. Morley yanked off his shirt, but he left his shoes on. The muck by the river often had bits of broken glass, rusted nails, crushed pop cans, their torn edges razor sharp to the tender foot. He took a large step into the water up to his knees, then up to his thighs. And then he stopped.

A smell hit him. A smell he had forgotten about. The water ran around his legs and pushed, but his feet were too deep into the mud and leaves to budge. That odor. The same one he smelled everyday when he shaved, got a glass of water out of the tap, bathed, washed his car. Every drop of water he used came from the Mississippi and it always carried the smell of dead fish, and he had grown used to it. But this was unfiltered mud and water carried from upriver. Morley saw a hand, then a face, appear above the surface of the water near the boat. He looked quickly behind him, hoping someone was nearby who could run for help, but no one was there. He saw the man's arms flailing in an effort to keep himself above

water. He knew the river could look deceptively calm. He dove in up to his neck, careful to keep his legs near the surface and away from the undertow.

Water seeped into his parted lips. He tasted the very odor he smelled a moment before. The water was warm, but he was shaking. He was having trouble controlling his arms and legs because they were trembling so fiercely. The river took hold and dragged him south with the drowning man. He hadn't enough power to fight its control. He heard the tiniest splash behind him, turned his head, and he caught sight of Max plunging in, determined to follow. Morley shouted over his shoulder.

"Max, go back!" but Max continued swimming downstream.

Morley's legs sank. He tried bringing them back to the surface so he could kick his way to the boat and man, but they wouldn't budge. They were being drawn forward. He saw a glimpse of deep pink and blue sky, a cloud, the boat, and a filtered brown light. Down he went. He tested his legs again, but they were being dragged south with logs, branches, bottles, and so many millions of gallons of water. The current pushed him like a giant, fleshy hand. He could feel his heartbeat speed up. A white panic washed over his eyes. He let go of the last bit of air in his lungs.

The current spun Morley around once under the water. He kept his mouth pressed shut, his tongue held tightly against the roof and back of his mouth creating pressure to keep the

water out of his nose. He fought against his thrashing limbs and clutched his hands into two fists, felt the muscles in his upper arms tighten against the temptation to freeze up. The thump in his head from the beat of his heart was slowing to make up for lack of air.

Something knocked him hard on the back of his head. He clutched at the branch, and it carried him forward rather than up. Morley felt a surge of hysteria in his stomach. He thought, *I'm going to die*. He was sure he couldn't keep himself from sucking in a chest full of water for much longer. He loosed his grip from the branch and forced his way to the surface. His muscles slacked despite a chill tunnel of water rushing past him. He kicked hard and his legs moved fairly easily. He kicked with just as much punch again, and again. His head jumped above the surface, and the air made a wheezing sound as he tried to take it in too quickly, catching a few drops of water with it. He swam instinctively for the shore.

He turned his head to the side to avoid swallowing water from a small wave. Behind him he saw Max dog-paddling with the current. Ahead, the man's face showed itself several feet from the side of the boat. In a frenzy, the man's hands beat at the water until he subsided to limply let the water push him, his nose barely above the surface. They were almost past the fishing island.

A gust brushed Morley's forehead. He looked again at the shoreline. It was closer than the man was. He knew he

couldn't leave the man. The trees on the island flapped weakly with their branches, drained from another stifling day. The river had almost drowned him once when he was a boy, and he had hated it ever since. The air was thick. A leaf by the edge of the river was tossed by the breeze and the pale underside seemed to wink at him.

Morley breathed deeply to clear his head. He waved his arms back and forth through the water to hold himself up. With each breath, he felt strength return to his limbs, a little more fog lift from his eyes, and the will to reach the man grew. He used the crawl to keep his arms and legs close to the surface. His anger at the river made him feel invincible. One stroke brought him to within twenty feet, a second stroke a foot closer. The water seemed to give way and propel him.

He checked for Max, who was still laboring furiously to catch up. Max was grunting quietly with the effort. Traffic ran along the river road, and to the right was a clear view of the river all the way to the Missouri side. The fishing island had slipped past. The clouds were a rich pink and orange, then yellow along the fringes. The sun bared a bright red face as if it had sunburned itself. Fifteen feet, then twelve, then nine feet to go. A splash ahead as the man jerked his arms. His head showed from his ears on up, then settled back down so just his nose and chin were visible.

A skin of red from the sun coated the water, but under

the surface, it was growing black. Morley felt panic return. He had to get the man out of the water before dark fell. A stiffness crept back into his arms and legs. Shaking it off, he stroked forward using the current to his advantage. As long as he wanted to head downriver, the Mississippi was his friend. About four feet from him he saw the man's head still maintaining its precarious hold above water. Only nose, forehead, mouth, and the smallest portion of his chin remained constantly above the surface. His face looked like a plastic Halloween mask thrown carelessly into the river.

"Mister, how you doing?" Morley said.

The man didn't turn around. He managed only the faintest answer.

"Dizzy. Can't catch my breath."

Morley heard a yelp behind him. Max's head was coming out of the water. A wild spot of pink showed around both eyes, his four legs kicking desperately. Down he went again. Max was tired and the river was taking him. But Morley couldn't leave the man. That had been decided when he turned away from shore. They reached the tip of another island. A small branch spun past. If he could just reach the man, or right the boat, or grab man and Max and drag them to one of the islands. He looked behind him for Max, who was still struggling.

The man's eyes started to close. Not an involuntary blink, Morley saw, but a slow, slipping kind of blink. And

with the eyelids closing, the water began to flow over the man's face. Morley swung his arms deliberately through the water as if he were battling his way through a crowd, reached down and caught the man by his collar. He kept a tight grip on the man's shirt and followed him down until he could slip his arms under the shoulders. Morley had never taken lifesaving. It was difficult to kick to the surface without his legs and knees jabbing at the man's back or getting tangled with his legs. He freed one arm from around the man and used that to help pull them to the surface. Funny, he hadn't thought about air for several seconds. As soon as the notion hit him, his lungs began to sting.

Their heads came out of the water, but there was no blue sky. Everything was black, and there was only the lightest sound of water trickling around his neck and arms. Morley thought he was passing out. He couldn't see anything. The sound of water was faint; his limbs felt heavy and cold. Maybe he hadn't reached the surface, but was breathing in water, instead. His fingers tingled. He was light-headed. Something tapped him on the back of the neck. The boat. They had come up under the boat. The numbing cold left his arms. He reached behind him with one arm to feel the inside of the upside-down boat resting over them. The metal was cool and smooth. It was a comfort compared to the brown agitation and push of the water. He couldn't let go of the man, still dead weight in his arms, until a small cough wracked his body. At

least the man was breathing, yet. How to get the boat turned over, he wondered.

"We're going under water just for a second," he told the man. He felt a nod, and he slipped the two of them from beneath the metal shell. The noise of rushing water around them was welcome. The setting sun looked cheering and the breeze felt warm. Out of the corner of his eyes, Morley saw one of the floatable cushions from the rowboat. He grabbed it before it could drift past.

"Do you think you could hang on to this a minute while I try righting the boat?" Morley asked. Again the man nodded. He took the cushion. It sank a little under his weight.

Morley hesitated before leaving the man. The roar of a passing truck sounded like his old school friends shouting his name from the river's edge. Though barely a minute had passed since he last checked, it seemed as if the sun had dipped several more feet behind the trees. If the river weren't swirling around him, he would have felt a drop of sweat run from under one of his arms. The log remained upstream from him. The Mississippi could seem mild, but anything riding on its surface moved quickly, revealing the strength of the current beneath.

Morley went back below the boat to push it up and over. He couldn't get enough control to right it. Holding onto an edge with both hands, he lowered himself until his head was submerged. Then he began kicking with all his might,

something of a running start in water. The boat lifted a few inches. Morley moved toward the flat-ended stern, grasped the edge once more, forced himself down until just his fingers were above water, and began kicking. He felt something large and soft hit his legs. Max was the first thought to cross his mind. The current carrying him swiftly underwater. Morley tried wrapping his legs around Max, lifting him closer to the surface, but he slipped through. He let the boat slide from his fingers as he reached beneath him. Nothing.

The river jerked him under again. He strained against the undertow as if he were in a tug of war against several men. His legs felt heavy and useless. A thrumming sound pounded through the water like the lulling sound of a barge, but it grew stronger and faster. It reminded him of the engine of the Floating Casino. The drumming disturbed the steady flow of the quiet old Mississippi he knew as a boy. A few bubbles of air escaped his nose and lips, and his arms and legs began to fight independently of each other against the river and back toward the surface.

As his ears rose above the water, the drumming din passed into a sharp sound like a whip and spank of water on the underside of a speeding motorboat on the other side of the island. If he had been forty feet more ahead, he could have waved down help. Morley drifted forward with the river's current again, reaching ahead with his legs, still searching for Max. It was then that he felt a light bump against the

toe of his sneaker, and Max was gone.

Morley lay on his back, his feet rising to the surface. The tips of his shoes were silhouettes. Water rushed over his face, sending his gray hair into his eyes. He rolled over onto his stomach. He felt drained. Too tired to try anymore. He quit struggling for a moment as a strange desire for sleep snuck over him. His limbs were slack. He let the water cradle and bounce him like a parent playing with an infant. But he couldn't let himself drift now. He had to right the boat.

Morley heard the whiz of truck tires on the river road. He wondered if anyone on the bluffs could see him and the man fighting the river. People were probably inside watching TV. Warm indoor light encasing their chores, laundry and dishes. He looked downriver to see if just maybe Max had surfaced, but there was no sign of him.

They were nearing the end of the island now; there was the tip of another up ahead. He reached the rowboat again. He saw one of the oars floating nearby. He knew he didn't have the strength to flip the boat over by himself. It was then that he decided the river could help him. The rowboat was drifting sideways. He dragged back on the stern so it faced north against the current. Grabbing the gunnel in both his hands, he tried hoisting himself onto the back. His hands slipped. He tightened his hold on the edge and pulled himself up again, resting on his stomach like a seal at a water show.

Ridges running lengthwise on the bottom of the boat cut into his rib cage. A groan escaped as he pulled himself up to his waist. The boat rose a couple of inches in front and hung there. Morley pushed down harder on the gunnel to get his right leg onto the underside. He felt the back end begin to give way beneath him. The river did the rest. The current pushed the forepart forward and up. Morley felt the stern continue to sink. The forepart persisted rising. He saw the shadow of the bow hang over him. He pushed himself to the side. The edge of the boat scraped his left arm as it came down with a muffled thump next to him.

Morley drew the man still clinging to the cushion toward him. As the boat flipped over, the stern had scooped in water. The rowboat sat low in the water. The man held its edge and tried raising himself, hooking one leg over the gunnel, Morley pushing up his other leg. The boat dipped and bounced. The man fell wearily in the bottom of the boat, but sat up. A small flap of skin hung from the bump on his head. The man helped Morley in by tugging on the back of his shirt. Morley looked back into the river to see if he could find the oar again, but it wasn't there. He began to grab for the cushion-float. A soft clunk against the bottom of the boat caught his ear. Both he and the man reached under from opposite sides. The man handed an oar to Morley.

The island was about fifteen feet away. Morley wanted to get to solid Illinois land, though. He dipped his blade into

the water. He felt the puddle of water in the bottom of the boat climbing above his ankles. The man pointed to Morley's feet, and he saw a hole about the width of his wrist.

They were nearing the end of the island. Morley rested on his knees facing it, then he dug deeper into the river with the oar, the man, for whatever it was worth, with his hands. The man had to give up. He leaned back exhausted, the smallest trickle of blood combing through his hair.

The bottom of the rowboat scraped into silt and rotting leaves. The man staggered and slumped against a tree. He smiled feebly at Morley.

"You saved my life."

A figure at the edge of the road emerged from a car.

"You folks need any help?" he asked, hands cupped to his mouth.

"Our boat has a hole busted in it," Morley said.

"I've got a friend down the way with a motorboat," he said. "Give me five minutes." And he hopped back in his car and headed down the road.

"I would have been a goner if you hadn't been around," the man said, sheepishly. "My name's Stanley." They rested with their heels in the river.

Morley smiled.

The high-pitched grind of a motorboat carried over the water from downriver. A young man was driving. The older man, who had called to them, was with him. The younger man

cut the engine.

"Glad I saw you out here," said the older man. "Might have ended up spending the night on the river like Huck Finn." He laughed.

"My friend here knocked his head pretty badly," Morley said. "My truck is about a mile upriver. I'd appreciate it if you could drive us up there, so I can get him somewhere to patch him up."

"Saved my life," Stanley said again.

The older man looked at the cut on Stanley's head. "You're a hero, buddy," he said, giving Morley a light slap on the back. The younger man nodded, turning the motor back on and heading north. "Hey, you might end up in the papers."

Morley dropped Stanley off at the hospital. He made a call to Ed from a payphone in the visitors' lobby.

"Take the evening off. It's not a busy night, anyway," his boss said. "We'll see you tomorrow."

Around ten o'clock, he got a call from a reporter from the local weekly who wanted a few quotes and told him that she'd send a clipping when the story came out. That was followed by a neighbor unused to Morley being home in the evenings so he came by to make sure no one was breaking in. Stanley called from the hospital to thank him again and find out if he preferred Virginia baked ham to honey-baked. He wanted to show his gratitude somehow. He had gotten his number from a nurse who knew Morley. And the nurse knew

Allison Creely, the reporter. Then his boss rang to say his wife wanted to make him dinner the next night, and bring along Max, she'd cook him a burger. At eleven, Morley turned off the phone. He fixed himself a cup of coffee and managed to kick Max's water bowl. He mopped up the water with a paper towel. Morley sank into bed. The house was quiet.

Lying on his back, he stared at the ceiling. He was used to the empty space in the queen bed by now, but just tonight he rolled over into his ex-wife's half for the reassurance that once upon a time, he wasn't alone. He almost imagined he could still smell her perfume in the sheets and pillows. Every half hour he'd feel the familiar rumble of the river barges with his left arm pressed against the outer wall. Then he'd hear the soft growl, something like a Mack truck working its way up a hill, only this had a lulling sound. A glow crossed the white walls from a spotlight on the front of a tug spinning left and right, searching for large, loose debris in the river. He pictured the fear in Max's eyes again, his small body bullied by the might of the river.

The sheet was cool and smooth on his back. He placed his hands under his head, his eyes easing shut against the soft drumming of a towboat's engine. His throat constricted. He felt that if he fell asleep he would lose Max entirely and his own moment of glory. He wasn't ready yet for the healing effect of slumber. He opened his eyes and watched a red-faced digital clock turn from minute to minute.

DINING WITH THE MORGANS

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I know that there are at least a dozen stories to tell about my mother. She was a prankster. She led people on wild goose chases. But only when she thought they hadn't treated her fairly, like the Morgans. Those who fell victim to her antics could never be certain when she was serious or when she was just too clever.

Mother was one of those people that families love to talk about during reunions: "Remember the time that she...." But no one really understands what made her the way she was. Father was always so quiet in comparison that I admired the way Mother seemed in charge. When she held my hand, I felt sure of where I was going even though I might not be certain I wanted to follow. In many ways, Father and I were much more alike.

I think what made Mother prank the Morgans was a poor introduction between our families. Mother and Mrs. Morgan eventually became terrific friends over the years, but they got off to an inauspicious beginning. The Morgans lived across the street. Their house was painted a light yellow, and their manicured lawn was surrounded by a white picket fence. On the day Mother walked over there to welcome them to the neighborhood, Mrs. Morgan told her that she really had hoped to move into the area known as Country Club Hills. Ours was strictly middle-class, and Mother was proud of the way people kept their homes trim. Those in the Hills had the

foreign cars and Cadillacs, the gardeners, and the club attitude, something conveyed by an upward tilt of the head. The Morgans had the Caddy, the gardener, even the bearing it seemed, just not the home adjacent to the golfing green. So they had the means of looking and in some respects acting like the club set, but not enough means to buy into it all the way. It would take some time for Mother to forgive Mrs. Morgan, and in her mind, no better way to forgive than to have some fun at Mrs. Morgan's expense. Father didn't generally condone Mother's idea of a good joke; he was in fact a calming influence on her, if anyone could be, by his manner. He wasn't always successful. Once in a while, he'd surprise me by playing along with her gag.

It would become tradition for our family and the Morgans to dine together on the first Sunday of every month. It started when I was six and very soon after the Morgans moved in. They had an awful son named Michael, who fortunately went away to college after I entered the eighth grade. He used to slouch, and he would leer at all the girls who walked by on their way back from school. If he liked them he would whistle, and if he didn't, he would low like a cow. But worst of all, he liked to stick straws through hot dogs, and then shoot the insides at whomever walked by, especially at me. This was a common game of the grade school boys, and they practiced it assiduously at recess after lunch. Hot dogs were the everyday backup to the otherwise changing cafeteria menu.

In August, Mother was startled to receive an invitation to dinner from the Morgans, some three months after their arrival and a little less time since Mrs. Morgan's insult. It would be the first Sunday that we ate with them. Mother went outside and picked the two largest zuchinni and the three plumpest eggplants out of our garden as a housewarming present. She hadn't gotten around to inviting their family over, and that upset her. Even though she thought Mrs. Morgan in particular was a snob, she didn't like to be one-upped or put in anyone's debt.

She had urged Father to put his Sunday best back on, saying, with a strain in her voice, that we might not be from Country Club Hills, but we knew how to dress. Mother helped me change back into my prettiest dress, which was pink and had a deep pink satin bow to go with it, and finally, she got herself ready. I could hear her pulling down the attic steps from the hallway ceiling. Her heels clicked softly on the worn pine planks. The crisp rustle of tissue paper sounded from above. Mother came down the steps with a hat on her head that I had never seen before. It was made of straw, dyed a bright green. Purple grapes were glued around the crown. They bounced around with each step she took and made the hat flop from side to side so that she had to grasp the top to prevent it from toppling off her head.

Father came from the bedroom as we all prepared to leave.

"We're going to miss the funeral this afternoon," he

said.

"Well, we didn't know the judge very well. Besides, I thought we had already decided that a funeral was no place for a child," she said, glancing toward me.

"I thought you didn't like the Morgans," he said. "I was astonished when you accepted."

He finished adjusting his tie when he looked at Mother for the first time since emerging from their room. It was then he saw the hat.

"What in heaven's name is that on your head?" he said. I started to laugh, but stopped when Mother frowned at me. I stared at my father's shoes.

"A hat," Mother said, raising her chin.

"It looks like a vineyard."

"It was great aunt Edna's, the milliner," she added. She reached for my hand, carried the basket of vegetables in the other, and led us to the Morgans' front door. Father came slowly behind.

"Are you still able to meet for lunch tomorrow before the governor's speech?" she asked.

Father said, yes, he was able to.

"Knock on the door," Mother told me. "Firmly."

Mrs. Morgan answered. I could see Mr. Morgan putting down his newspaper and getting up from a sofa to greet us. There were Oriental carpets on the floor and a rich, tall linen press of some years to one side. Michael was nowhere to

be seen.

Mrs. Morgan, in a cream silk blouse and skirt, her equally silky hair in a heavy bun that appeared to weight down the back of her head and to tilt her chin in just the right country club fashion, looked down at me and said, "Hello. What a pretty pink dress."

"Thank you," I said.

Mrs. Morgan turned to Mother, her eyes running over her hat and settling on her face. "I'm so pleased you could come. Please, come in."

She pulled the door open wider and motioned us in while Mr. Morgan shook each of our hands in turn. Father seemed forgotten behind Mother's green hat. He followed her silently after wiping his shoes on the welcome mat.

"Please, sit down," said Mr. Morgan. He seemed as if he would be uncomfortable in any kind of social setting beyond immediate family because his eyes repeatedly sought refuge on the floor.

"Michael should be coming soon. I just sent him up to wash his face, for the third time," said Mrs. Morgan.

"Is there any place I could put my hat? It's already feeling a bit heavy for a warm day like today," said Mother, lifting it, grapes and all, from her head.

"Let me take it," offered Mrs. Morgan. "Such a lovely shade of green."

"Oh, I've always liked it. I wear it only on special

occasions. My husband says that it's his favorite."

Father shot Mother a look, but she pretended not to notice. He hadn't met the Morgans before this, and he was not one to make hasty judgments about people as Mother so often did.

"Well, I can see why," Mrs. Morgan said, taking it from Mother's hands. As she did so, one of the grapes broke off and fell to the rug.

"Oh dear," said Mrs. Morgan as she stooped down. "I'm so sorry." The grape rolled toward me. I picked it up and put it in the pocket of my dress. While Mrs. Morgan was bent over with the hat in her hand, two more grapes fell and bounced somewhere beneath the sofa. Just then, I saw Michael sitting on the stairs watching all of us. When the school year arrived, he would slink around the edges of the playground.

"That's never happened before," said Mother, taking the hat back. "Perhaps it's better if I wear it."

Mr. Morgan and Father were settled into chairs opposite one another. Mr. Morgan leaned back in his seat and appeared to be building up courage to play host. He put his hands on the armrests.

"Shame about Judge Frank," he said. "We've only been here a short time, but everyone seemed to think so well of him. When's the funeral?"

Father started to respond, but Mother interrupted.

"Are you going to the parade tomorrow?" she said.

"The what?" asked Mrs. Morgan.

"The parade. If you enjoy after dinner strolls, we might walk into town later to see if they've put up any streamers," Mother said, adjusting her hat so that it fell a little to one side.

"A parade?" said Mrs. Morgan. "I haven't heard anything about a parade, have you, George?"

"Yes. It was in the paper."

Mrs. Morgan turned to my mother. "Relatives are coming later this week and I haven't read a paper in days because I've been getting ready. Mindy, a very sweet young woman, has been helping me."

My father studied Mother curiously as she played with her hat.

"A parade for what?" Mrs. Morgan said.

"Governor Thomas. You haven't heard about his speech set for tomorrow? Only a month before the election and this county is crucial. If he doesn't win here..." Mother said, shaking her head as if our county were large enough to influence state politics.

"Well then, we must take a walk after supper. What do you say, George?"

"I'd walk ten miles to shake his hand. He's an amazing man. See? I didn't even call him a politician."

"Absolutely," Mother said.

Father began to say something to her, the breath popping

out of his mouth, but he closed it just as rapidly. I think he couldn't tell about Mother. Maybe the hat was as far as she planned to go this time. But he knew there was no use trying to change her mind. In my teenage years, my father often accused me of a similar stubborn streak.

"You see the game on the tube this Saturday, Bob?" said Mr. Morgan.

"No, I had to do some work on the yard."

"I could send Mr. Phil over after he's done my lawn next Saturday. He may be interested in picking up more work."

My father was a Jeffersonian who believed in doing his own chores and never wanted more property than he could manage alone. He cast a less stern look at Mother.

"Gingersnap," Mother said to me. "Follow Mrs. Morgan into the kitchen through that door, and give her the vegetables." She pushed me gently toward the kitchen with the basket in my hand.

Michael Morgan came running down the stairs and into the kitchen behind me.

"Michael," Mr. Morgan said, "don't run in the house."

"Yes, sir," he said from the kitchen as he tried to yank the basket from my hand behind his mother's back, but I put out my leg to trip him. He stuck his tongue out at me and thought he could get away with it just because he was older.

"Put the basket up on the counter, honey," Mrs. Morgan said to me. "If you both will bring out the bread and butter

to the table, you may stay there. We'll be ready to eat in a minute."

After we said grace, I felt a kick under the table. Michael sat across from me. He shot me a wicked grin behind the bread basket. I tried to kick him back, but my legs were too short, and Mother told me to sit still.

"Maybe we ought to turn on the radio to see if there are any reports about the governor," said Mrs. Morgan. "I think he's wonderful."

"I'd rather not think about the news during dinner," said Mr. Morgan. "We'll take a walk later."

After supper, Mother and I helped Mrs. Morgan bring out the dessert. It was Black Forest cake with cherries between each layer. I loved cherries. But Mrs. Morgan gave Michael and me chocolate pudding. She thought "the children would like it better." I just felt left out.

"Honey, can you carry two?" Mrs. Morgan asked me. I nodded. "Can you carry yours and Michael's, and then you may sit down." Mother assented with a bob of her head and I took the two cups. "Wouldn't it be lovely if they could be friends? I'm sure Michael wishes he had a sister as dear as your daughter."

Somewhere between the kitchen and the dining room table I managed to slip the plastic grape from my pocket into his pudding. I set it in front of Michael and sat down in my seat.

"This is very good," said Mr. Morgan.

Father spotted me eyeing his cake. He offered me a large bite with frosting and extra cherries. He leaned over and asked for a spoonful of my pudding.

Michael coughed and twisted his face, then put his hand in front of his mouth, a purple grape sliding slowly from between his lips into the palm of his hand.

"What is it, dear?" asked his mother.

"Nothing," he said, and glared at me across the table. Mother's mouth wrinkled into a smile. A sideboard clock chimed four.

"Should we go for that walk?" she said.

Outside the breeze had picked up a bit, but it was still slow and heavy like August. We walked in twos, and I held Mother's hand and tried to copy her step. I could tell by the way Father's eyes rested on Mother that all was not right, so I held on tighter as he lagged behind. I wished he weren't so far back. When we reached the main road, there was no activity. Red, white, and blue streamers hung from every other streetlight. A '63 Plymouth Fury passed by. All the shops were closed for the day. The town hall clock hands rested on quarter past four.

"I wonder if they plan to put up the rest of the decorations tomorrow morning?" said Mrs. Morgan. "I expected banners and flags."

"Well, it's a Sunday," said Mr. Morgan. "Maybe the town

didn't think they would be appropriate for today or they couldn't finish yesterday. People don't like to work on Sunday. At least that's one thing that hasn't changed since I was growing up." He looked up and down the street.

Mother said, "Maybe they're worried that it will rain tonight."

"Why, there's a thought," said Mrs. Morgan.

"What do you think, Father?" Mother said, turning to him with a smile.

"Well, dear, all I know is that the governor will be here," he said, raising his eyebrows, "tomorrow." Looking back, I think Father knew more mischief was up, although he wasn't sure what it would be. I also saw that, to a certain extent, everyone likes to be in on a joke as long as he's not the object of it.

"We'd better be getting back," said Mr. Morgan. He looked at his watch. "I have some papers I need to finish for work. I hope no one minds."

Michael yawned loudly, and Mrs. Morgan told him to cover his mouth.

"We'll certainly have to come back into town Monday--morning or afternoon do you think?" said Mrs. Morgan to my mother.

When we turned around, Mother hesitated as if she were trying to hold back the group. "Oh, afternoon will be fine." Mrs. Morgan and Michael were now leading the way to our

street. As they did so, we saw two police cars with their headlights on coming down the main street. Several more cars followed behind.

"What do you suppose that is?" said Mrs. Morgan, stopping at the curve in the sidewalk. We all turned to look.

"I don't know," said Mr. Morgan.

"Let's wait and see," Mother said, turning away from Father. She pulled her hat down tighter over her head to hide the smile forming on her face. "Perhaps the governor is staying here for the night."

"Why, it could be," said Mrs. Morgan, her breath coming more quickly. "He would want to be rested for his speech tomorrow. He's a sensible person."

The cars rolled forward, the light from their brights wavering over the tops of the hot black road. A young couple emerged from a sidestreet across the way. They, too, waited at the curb to watch the procession. The closer the cars got, the faster they seemed to be moving, as if they were in a hurry. We could hear their engines turning over as they drew nearer. Mrs. Morgan stretched her neck forward. The two police cars drove past, the occupant of one turning to us with his steel gray eyes, his dark glasses pushed up just past his brow. A long, black car trailed behind. Mrs. Morgan turned to us and said, "It has to be him! He would use the police for protection." Mother waved excitedly into the window of the next car. Mr. Morgan said, "Well, now, I don't know."

Father reached for Mother's arm and said, "Mother, what are you thinking?" Mrs. Morgan said, "It's him! It's him!" Michael stepped back and cocked his head to the side. Mother asked Mrs. Morgan, "What shall we say?" Mrs. Morgan put her hands up to her mouth and said, "You have my vote!" The shiny car went by us, the bright sky and clouds gleaming off the waxed black paint. Through the back window, we saw white roses mounded on a coffin. Mrs. Morgan drew in her breath and put her hands over her mouth. "Oh, my goodness," we heard her say. Draped from the back of the hearse, a cloth sign read, "Farewell, Judge Frank."

I felt something hit the back of my head. I turned around to see Michael's arm dropping to his side and the purple grape rolling on the ground. Mother took off her hat. "Come along, Father," she said. "We have a long week ahead."

My father's mouth was drawn tight as he looked into Mother's eyes. Father took my hand and turned around. Mother had answered to some need to guard her pride. I feared her conceit. It required too much care. I wasn't sure I would ever want to feel that fiercely. I pulled back on my father's hand until Mother caught up to us.

DEVILS' NIGHT

A single light was on in the hall, casting a nobody's-home-glow around the rest of the one-story house. The shadows would have been eerie if the night hadn't been so beautiful. The night would have been beautiful if the news broadcast hadn't been so eerie. Marlene Brand rested in an armchair by a window. The way the breeze blew the curtains gently this late in the fall was almost cruel, she thought. It moaned a little as it came through the screen. It was only as if to needle her that there would not be another spring. For anyone. A stir of desperation fluttered in her throat. She wasn't sure she believed the news. But WABC said so, and so it must be true.

There. She clicked off her radio as fast as she could because she didn't want to hear anymore. It was bad enough that Europe was falling apart. Germany was demanding the return of its former colonies, and President Roosevelt was inspecting warplanes. America must be thinking of joining the fight. War would be declared, a draft would be announced. Another terrible war. The last war was supposed to be just that, the last one. Everyone was irritable and suspicious these days with the tension. But this was even worse than a war in Europe. This was something she wasn't sure anyone knew how to fight. She smoothed her dress over her knees with her hands. There were many things she should have done with her life. To begin with, Colin James.

She had turned on the radio show, Orson Welles' Mercury Theatre on the Air, a few minutes late because one of the chickens got out of the pen, and a fox was tormenting the birds nightly. She checked the coop latch three times. She wouldn't listen to Welles' science fiction drivel except that her nephew, Michael, was fond of the show and, since everyone else in town also fancied it, she felt she ought to know what interested them so much. She liked her house tidy, her chickens safe, her mental house kept up-to-date with news and trends.

She knew she should bring in the pumpkin out front before she forgot. This was Devils' Night, the night before Halloween. Her pumpkin might be thrown into the street by some delinquent. In place of the usual horror on the radio, there had been a dance program which pleased her much more than Mercury Theatre. Her sense of duty was paying off for once, but then a broadcaster had broken in with the news that Martians were landing in New Jersey a hundred miles south of where she lived. She thought he said Germans, and the fright made her turn from a *Saturday Evening Post*, made her edge toward the radio and furrow her brow. She felt sympathy and anger, and then the announcer said they were invading New York as well and blasting people with deadly gases. Her anger turned to alarm, and she held as still as she could while she listened like a child under her bedcovers, desiring a breath of cool air but not daring to move for fear of missing the

movements of the monster outside the sheets. She leaned in closer to the speaker. He continued. It seemed he said Martians, not Germans. Well, that was the silliest thing she had ever heard of. She exhaled. With all the anxieties over European distresses, she was ready to believe that Germans were storming the Jersey shore, but never Martians. Yet the report went on in earnest. The insistence of the broadcaster's voice began to infect her until she couldn't stop her hands from shaking. The more he spoke the more she trembled. She couldn't decide whether she ought to sink her tall, lean figure deeper into the chair with the feel of the pillow at her back or to seek old Mrs. Kitt for reassurance.

Then she thought to reach for the *New York Times* to check the radio schedule. When she sat up and saw that it wasn't in its usual spot in the basket by her seat, she remembered she had gathered papers from around the house that morning, shredded and spread them out in the flower bed in back under a layer of leaves. The papers would decompose little over winter, but come spring, they might prevent a few weeds from sprouting. Not that it seemed it would matter now.

What chilled her most about the episode occurred a few minutes after the account first came over the air. She heard the slap of a screen door and a scream across the clearing in back. The air chilled in the following silence. The sinking blue no longer seemed attractive, the winds no longer tender or comforting, but startling like snow falling inside a boot.

She had looked out a window from her seat and just made out the heads of her neighbors way across the field going back indoors, clutching together as if for protection. It felt as if something were crawling through the dark behind her, getting ready to spring. She folded quickly back into the armchair.

If New York were to succumb to alien poisons, it wasn't the dying that bothered her. It was the fact that she was alone. And not even the fact she was alone at this particular moment, but that she had always lived by herself. She was forty-two. She had stayed in Noble her whole life because this was where she grew up, this was where her parents had lived, her sister until she got married, and Michael was here, and so this was where her love rooted itself. She hadn't gone to college so she could stay with her mother after her father's death. And then she inherited the family home. She had been too content to bother changing things. She suddenly decided her contentment was her biggest sin.

"I've been selfish," she said aloud. The statement made her cringe farther into her seat. Her freedom had allowed her to travel more than most people in Noble. She couldn't feel sorry about that. The unoccupied sofa across from her appeared to recede into the shadows of the wall as if it were shrinking from the idea of another human being entering and taking possession of a cushion. She replayed in her mind again the awful urgency in the broadcaster's voice. *He* had

sounded scared. If she had only done something years ago about Colin James, she could talk to him now. They would be sitting in the living room together, drinking tea and reading, and not minding the end so much in each other's company. She had liked him since grade school. She was ashamed that thirty years later, he was still on her mind. Noble was a small town, and no one else ever seemed to draw her sympathy as he had. He married a classmate of theirs named Lily, Lily the skinny spoiled girl who didn't let Marlene play skip rope in fifth grade. Fifteen years after the wedding, Lily ran off with a traveling salesman twelve years her junior. Marlene felt guilty when she was momentarily gratified by Lily's shocking betrayal. She said to herself that if she truly loved Colin, she would have wished him a happy marriage. She wished she could be sure it would be easier to face this evening of Martians and poisonous gases if there were someone else she could talk to. Colin would be someone to worry about if the radio spoke the truth. Then she realized she was worried about him anyway. He was by himself.

She hadn't moved since turning off the broadcast. Her left hand lay on an armrest. At this morning's church service, during the silent prayer, she had sneaked a look at Colin across the aisle before bowing her head despite her best efforts not to gaze at him. He turned his face from his lap and winked as he used to do during high school assemblies. It had turned into a sign of their continuing friendship when he

started dating Lily in the eleventh grade. She stood abruptly. She was going to find out what that latest wink meant. He was free again, after all. She sniffed the air sharply a few times on her way to the kitchen. If there were a deadly gas, well, she couldn't smell it. She always doubted the fantastic such as the invention of television some years before. She couldn't believe pictures could be transmitted through the air, yet only two weeks ago the minister bought one and invited members of the congregation over to see it. The moving image was tiny, no more than five inches across, but it was set in a huge wooden case with many tubes and wires. She soaked a few dishcloths under the faucet and held them over her face in case the Martians were releasing vapors at this very moment, and then she thought how ridiculous it all was. If the men from Mars were advanced enough to make their way to New York, their fatal gases could certainly not be stopped by a damp dishcloth from Woolworth's. It must have been her neighbor's scream that disrupted her poise. Just in case, though, she kept a cloth in hand. She couldn't remain indoors. The emptiness was ghostly. She turned off the hall light on her way out.

She sat on the front steps and a board creaked beneath her feet. She reflected with a small laugh that once more she forgot to ask her nephew to fix the bottom step. She pressed her hands between her knees to stop the shaking. She was glad Michael had left on business late that afternoon. He would be

well on his way to Cleveland by now. She again considered visiting her closest neighbor, Mrs. Kitt, a quarter mile away, but Marlene decided to let Mrs. Kitt die in peace if they were to die. Marlene could call her sister, but her sister didn't have a phone.

To die. The two words made her tremble violently. She felt as if the cooling air were pressing down on her, numbing her so that she tingled in her chest and throat. Deadly gases. She listened to every sound around her as she had never listened before. It was difficult to hear because a buzzing of fear lurked in her ears, behind her eyes as they strained in the dark. Mrs. Kitt was over seventy and did not own a radio because she thought radios were a waste of time. She wouldn't know Martians had landed. She would die happy. For a moment, Marlene hated technology. Then she thought of her car and where it could take her. She didn't trust herself not to bring up the subject of aliens with the elderly lady. She remained seated.

She glanced up at the sky. A few green leaves clung to her oak. She saw a red light moving in the night sky. Her stomach jumped and she balled her hands into fists. A breeze disturbed the leaves and branches which got in the way of her view of the light. She heard the sound of a motor and recognized it was a small plane from the nearby airstrip. The sound faded. Hair came loose from its tucked position behind her ears. The silence was awful. She thought of going back

in the house to turn on the radio again.

There was a feeling that she ought to do something extraordinary if this were her last night on Earth. Her last few hours. Maybe it was best not to find out what Colin's wink meant, in case it meant nothing. It was more satisfying to believe that it did. He'd been seven years without Lily; he must be ready to try again. She could tell Colin she loved him, except she didn't like dramatics for the same reasons she didn't care for science fiction. Neither one was sensible. She saw no use for creating cities on imaginary purple planets. Professing her love would be sickening melodrama on the night all were to die. She hugged the edge of the step with the backs of her knees. She was determined to carry on as if tomorrow were a typical day. If she were in one piece in the morning, she would open a jar of blueberries packed away from the summer harvest and make muffins. She would go to work at the dress shop where she had assisted Mrs. Kitt's daughter for the past twenty years.

She knew she lacked spontaneity. She lost Colin back in school because she never followed up the significance of his earliest smiles and winks. But that was because she expected she would leave Noble and she didn't think Colin ever would. Certainly, she couldn't have always been this stiff. She reached in her dress pocket for the car keys. It seemed so difficult to cling to her seat, though, or not to have a call from her nephew or to share a pot of tea with Mrs. Kitt. She

went inside. The clock said 8:17. From the back window, she saw movement by the chicken coop. She went through the kitchen out the door and picked up a broom.

There he was, that dirty old fox, snuffing around the coop. She reminded herself she was going to continue to act as if all were normal, as if her chicks would need protecting for many days to come. The fox looked at her without moving, then spun around and was gone into the weeds before she had a chance to raise a bristle. She laid the broom by the coop door, went to her room, and got a cardigan.

A scramble of gravel under tires came from down the road. She went to the porch. Beyond the trees and front gate, she saw the deputy's car driving slowly past on the street running by her house. She stepped back into the shadows and could just make out Lawrence through the rolled down side window. The glow of the instrument panel shone on his face. The sound of the radio carried to where she stood. His face had a green, somber cast in the panel light. He was going through the motions of a nightly patrol, but his eyes were mesmerized by the road ahead. On a normal night, he would stop and talk to her if he happened to spot her out front. He was good friends with Michael. Marlene stayed far back on the porch. She decided after all she did not want to see anyone if this were the last night. She would be too sorry to say good-bye because she would think of all the things she ought to have done. If there were no love in heaven, no embraces, she would

have missed all her opportunities here. She willed her nephew's train more speed. The car rolled by.

Marlene walked down the steps to the dirt road to watch the taillights flare up at the stop at the end of the road past Mrs. Kitt's house before the car pulled onto Route 24. A leaf fell at her feet. She could barely distinguish the right-turn blinker from that distance except that it lit the tall grasses in bursts of orange. No passing cars were there to take notice. She wished she had stopped Lawrence to ask how soon Noble would be overrun. Did he know what they ought to do to protect themselves? Had he seen Mr. James? She went inside. She slapped her thigh for hesitating once again.

She flicked on a living room light. The radio sat next to the armchair. Its dull face seemed to beckon, just a twist of the switch, it's your only contact with other people. She turned it on. There was music, sounding warm like the end to an average day, and then the broadcaster broke in again with a terrible report that ray guns were now being used on the population. If a radio could have a face, this one looked abruptly sinister. Marlene unplugged the set.

That was it. Before the end came, she would stop by Mrs. Kitt's house and bring the old woman with her to town. Colin lived on Fourth Street two blocks from the center of town. If these were the last few hours, her chickens did not need to be watched. She wished the fox a full stomach.

Mrs. Kitt's house was dark. Marlene knocked on her door.

She shouted, "Mrs. Kitt, it's Marlene. You must come to town with me." There was no answer. It was possible her children had her staying over for the evening. She turned away. The grasses at the edge of the field across the road rustled as a night creature slunk from view. She got back in the car and took the same right onto Route 24 as Lawrence had. The dark was no cover. It was a big, black, menacing cape bearing down on her back. It could smother her and even Mrs. Kitt wouldn't be there to witness the extinction. She laid her foot heavily on the gas.

A few miles and she was nearing town. She paused near the turn-off to Colin's home on a side street, but a man and woman happened to be crossing it right at that moment. She knew that she was generally not a superstitious woman, but she took it as a sign that now was not the time to be saying last good-byes to one's lover who never knew he was her sole love. Besides, she told herself, wouldn't this be a remarkable and bizarre night to go to town, shouldn't she see what the rest of her fellowman was doing on his last night, wasn't this history in the making? It was that easy to avoid him. The night sky bore down harder, making her flee Colin as fearfully as her empty house. Homes lined a narrow street that led to the post office and library. While the houses themselves were fairly old and fairly small, their lawns were deep and wide as if these people expected to have enough children that it would take such a yard to keep them outdoors. The town hadn't grown

as fast as their expectations.

In one driveway, she saw a family loading a station wagon with the heirloom rocking chair and the kids. At another, she thought she saw the Flemings cowering beneath a bare maple in their yard. No lights issued from doorways or windows. People clustered in groups on front porches. Boys carried baseball bats, a father toted a rifle, one grandmother had a hoe. A strange energy seemed to possess everyone, a destructive energy that made them tug belongings from their appointed positions inside their homes, made them take up weapons, and refuse to settle in for the night. Marlene admitted a similar restlessness brought her into town at a time she liked to be home in her armchair. She wondered what Colin was doing. If the world survived, she wasn't sure she would feel so wise for holding her tongue.

She parked a block beyond the post office. A wailing woman walked past. Marlene had never seen a face like hers. It may have been edgy before the crying, but the cry had turned as dry as a deserted well and her face as sad as a ball of soggy dough. Marlene got out of the car and went to her. Up close, she recognized the woman as an assistant to the tailor. She put an arm around her shoulders as they continued to walk forward, but the woman was oblivious to her touch.

"Where is everyone going?" Marlene asked, but the woman didn't answer. Her wail simmered into a moan. Her arms hung heavily by her sides. Marlene didn't know what to do with her

so they went into a crowded diner where people were seeking comfort in numbers. The woman would be safe with them. She sat her down and pushed her way through the people until she got to the kitchen. A coffee pot was full and hot. She poured a mug and brought it to the woman. She brushed a strand of hair from in front of the woman's eyes.

"Drink that, it will warm you a little," she said. It was already suffocating in the diner. People were sweating and their sweat smelled sour like a long illness. Their conversation was chatter, not the usual tepid diner talk, but a shrill activity that was as horrifying as the woman's hollow moan. Marlene shuddered from the base of her spine to the back of her head. The air seemed to grow hot and tight around her. She had a thought of Colin sitting in his dark, depleted house. It was easier to do nothing about him when she didn't know what she should do. She took one last look at the woman and it struck Marlene that her face was like a Halloween mask on which the factory forgot to paint the features. She was more unnerved by the idea that she might see the face change and so bring the woman's terror to life. Before that transformation could take place, Marlene shouldered her way out onto the sidewalk. She would rather die alone with the dark sky above her than surrounded by fear. She didn't like the thought that she was leaving the Colin question unresolved. The open air was peaceful contrasted with the diner. It didn't help her reach an answer. Then she noticed

people walking excitedly together. Some carried wet towels as she had done earlier. She hailed a man she knew as Mr. Barnes holding his child to him with both arms; he didn't hear her. His wife cleaved to his side, gripping an older child between them. Their terror made her angry. She didn't understand how they could let it control them so completely. Her indignation steeled her until she saw Mrs. Kitt standing with her family on a corner up ahead. Marlene couldn't help herself and ran to her.

"Mrs. Kitt, I'm so glad to see someone I know. My nephew is gone, and I didn't want to be alone with the news."

"If my son hadn't insisted I come over for supper tonight, I would have been by myself," she said.

"And aren't you glad he did insist?"

"No. I could have died peacefully in my bed. Look at this. A lot of good it is doing them," Mrs. Kitt said.

Marlene reached for her hand as she used to hold her mother's when something frightened her as a child. Mrs. Kitt was the one calm figure among them. Her anger drove away some of the panic. The press of people on the street was almost as unbearable as the piercing dialogues at the diner. Deputy Lawrence walked toward them. Marlene noticed he seemed uncertain whether he had a duty to perform or whether he ought to forsake his work and fend for himself.

"And if they're Martians," Mrs. Kitt continued, "I think I'd rather die anyway."

"I wonder if this is it?" Lawrence said.

"A good way to keep the peace, Larry," said Mrs. Kitt.

A man turned around to grab the deputy's shoulders. "My car is gone. Mother's been bedridden since she was seventy-five and I think she's taken off in the car." Lawrence followed the man down the street in search of his suddenly active mother.

Two more people crowded into the diner across the road. Marlene wondered if Colin were at his house. She reminded herself not to bother over him. Her life had been just right. Even at the sight of the eatery, the huddle of Kitts, the people scurrying around her, she felt oddly untroubled. She had no one to worry about, really.

And then she recognized her own calm was a sign of her greater fear of what Colin would say if she approached him. It seemed she might just drop by his house. People stopped over at friends' homes unannounced for a chat all the time. And on the last night on Earth, why not? She scanned the sky. It was barren and dark blue. Someone bumped her in his hurry to pass. Noble had always been too comfortable. It took danger to drive people together or the fear of an empty house. City life would have forced her out of her mold. In a city, she would have created a community of friends, whereas here the smallness of the town made her feel at home wherever she went. She could see Colin whether or not she ever told him what she felt. She hadn't done anything in the past seven

years because as long as she didn't, there was the chance he might be able to love her.

Marlene thought she may have grown complacent, yet she wasn't quite sure what was wrong with that. A man walked steadily down the sidewalk, a little bow-legged. She suppressed a smile. He had Colin's step. He came more clearly into view. The stride was similar, but it wasn't his, and she cast her eyes to the ground. It was funny she could feel so suddenly like a disappointed school girl.

She felt a tug on her sleeve.

"Come along," said Mrs. Kitt, "we're going back to my son's home. You may as well keep me company in this hysteria."

Marlene let herself be led by the arm. So she wasn't going to find out what Colin's smiles and winks suggested. She was following the same route she always took, putting off the answer until another time. Except they might all die tonight. She felt a resistance in her alternately pulling toward Colin and yielding to Mrs. Kitt. The Flemings drove by in their car, the children invisible in the back in dark outfits meant to hide them from alien eyes. The children would marry and multiply one day. She had no one with whom she could flee. Each step with the Kitts felt as if it were in the wrong direction even though it led to the mundane order of her days. Her nature was guided by order, but an impulse was growing. She figured that retreating with the Kitts would

pacify her doubts; she felt herself growing agitated. She couldn't withstand it anymore. She forgot her reasons to remain alone. She forgot about the consequences of learning that possibly Colin had never loved her. She saw again Colin winking at her from the church pew, the sun coming through the green stained glass window and warming her cheek and hair as she squinted against the light at him. She broke from the Kitts, who gave her a surprised look before going on their way. Gloom was settling on them as on everyone else around them. Marlene turned around and headed for Fourth Street. She hoped she'd get there before the aliens dropped the poisons and shot rays into their hearts.